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A Small Box in the Heart

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by

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Translated from the Arabic

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translator's permission.

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Ibtihal Salem, Cairo, 2010

Translator's Note

In this novel Ibtihal Salem takes a cinematic approach toward exploring the dialectic between present consciousness and memory. This involves abrupt shifts between scenes describing Maryam's experience, dreams and memory both from when she is growing up in Cairo and when she goes to work in Iraq. In this translation, I have chosen to mark off separate sections where these transitions occur and I have noted when there is a change of place. Although these sections are not marked or labeled in the original Arabic, I feel that they make the sometimes unfamiliar content easier for the English reader. The novel describes Maryam's "exile" to another Arab country for work, although the city and country to which she moves are never named. Salem's use of the Iraqi dialect and other clues make it clear that Maryam has gone to Iraq for work, and the city, portrayed in a sort of parallel with Cairo, seems to be Baghdad.

In other matters of style, I have also tried to replicate the poetic and occasionally folkloric tone of the prose. This has sometimes meant following the syntax or translating figures of speech more closely than I might otherwise in order to convey the sense that the original text was intended to draw on poetic language and traditional rhythms and images as it gently jar readers' expectations.

This translation is dedicated to the memory of Ibtihal Salem (1949-2015). I would like to thank Ahmed Kraima and Dalia Azmy for their invaluable help with questions pertaining to Arabic and Egyptian cultural references.

Introduction: Writing a History of the Internal

A Small Box in the Heart explores the experience and memory of Maryam Abdel Fatah, a young woman coming of age in the tumultuous environment of Egypt in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although the historical time frame of the novel takes us back some decades before the Egyptian revolution of 2011, it speaks to many of the issues and concerns that brought about that revolt—and indeed—to some of the broader concerns underlying the “Arab Spring”. The story of Maryam’s young life details the tragic impact upon individuals of the lack of personal and political freedoms, and of an economy that provides youth with little hope for work and stable futures. Through its shifting and poetic prose, it also examines a woman’s deep-seated longing for meaningful connections with others in the same boat.

The novelist, Ibtihal Salem, began publishing in the 1970s and her oeuvre includes three collections of short stories and seven novels.¹ This is the first of her novels

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¹ The short story collections are: *Al-Nawrus* [The Gull] (1989); *Dunyā Ṣaghīrah* [A Small World] (1992); and *Nakḥb Iktimāl al-qamr* [A Toast to the Full Moon] (1997). The novels are: *Nawāfidh Zarqā’* [Blue Windows] (2000); and *Ṣundūq Ṣaghīr fī-l-qalb* [A Small Box in the Heart] (2004); *Al-Samā’ la tamtur ahibba’* [The Sky does not Rain Lovers] (2008); *Yawm ‘ādī Jīdan* [A Very Ordinary Day] (2009); *Ka‘b wa ‘arūsah wa ḥiṣān* [A Knot, a Doll and a Horse] (2010); *Awqāt lil-ḥuẓn wa-l-faraḥ* (2013); *Al-ṣabīy allathi aḍḥā shābb wasīm* [The Boy who Turned into a Handsome Young Man] (2015).

to be rendered in English translation. Salem is considered one of the 1970s generation of Egyptian women writers, a generation that includes renowned novelists Radwa Ashour and Salwa Bakr. As a group, this generation is known for their experimentation with narrative forms such as Arabesque and polyphonic narratives, and also for their play with the multiple levels and registers of the Arabic language.

In *A Small Box in the Heart*, Salem blends the language of time, song and myth to explore an individual's feeling of alienation both while she is residing in her natal country and while is living in war-time Iraq, where she is forced to move for work. Maryam is figured as a woman who grew up in an old and relatively diverse quarter of Cairo, before consumer and capitalist development began to change the face of the older districts. The voice of an older Maryam provides the frame for the story. As she sits in her Turkish grandmother's flat, the mature Maryam narrates her various life experiences in the form of an internal monologue. She reflects upon her losses, but more positive memories of her childhood in the "old quarter" also revive her spirit and give her motivation to keep going. Popular culture references abound in the sections describing life in the "old quarter," including mention of popular songs and singers. I have taken advantage of this digital form of publication to include links to explain and illustrate some of these references.

Maryam's Turkish grandmother's home, which is the site of Maryam's reveries, provides her with both comfort and a haunting sense of loss. The contents of her grandmother's wooden chest provoke memories that give the reader a sense of the identity of a woman from an era past, but these memories also develop Maryam's own personal history and personality. Through these memories, we learn that Maryam has

experiences common to many young women of her generation. In contrast to her mother and grandmother, Maryam is able to go to college and to have a considerable amount of personal freedom and mobility. Maryam's memories of her college days provide some of the most entertaining pages of the novel, as they tell the story of young women living on their own, negotiating the values of a relatively conservative district and having experiences with new and diverse kinds of people in the city. We also hear about Maryam's participation in political demonstrations, and her subsequent traumatic dealings with the State Security forces. These experiences would be easy for many Egyptians to relate to after the 2011 revolution and subsequent political turmoil and repression. Maryam graduates from the University in 1974, but is unable to find satisfying work in Cairo due to the vicissitudes of the Sadat era economy and a bloated bureaucracy. She therefore goes to Iraq in search of work, while her beloved Saeed moves to America to pursue graduate studies. Despite his promises to the contrary, Saeed never returns from America and Maryam is heartbroken by the loss of her first love.

In Part Two of the novel, we learn about Maryam's adventures in Baghdad where she finds editorial work in a newspaper, but is devastated to discover that writers and journalists in Iraq face the same restrictions on freedom of expression as they do in Egypt. In Baghdad she meets Arabs from around the region who have also had to leave their countries due to economic issues or political persecution. She begins to fall in love with Aziz, a Palestinian and member of an underground democratic Palestinian political organization, who has lived the tragic life of a political refugee ever since his family fled Palestine in 1948. The novel's master scene takes place in Aziz's flat, otherwise known as "the airport" because of the multi-national group of Arabs that regularly meets there to

socialize and commiserate. In this scene, Maryam's older self as narrator provides a sweeping view of the individual experience of alienation and desperation across the post-colonial Arab world. Here, as elsewhere in the novel, Salem incorporates parts of Arab poems and songs that help to convey the various experiences of the Egyptian, Tunisian, Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi youth. The group sing songs based on poems by Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, and the Egyptian poet Salah Jahin. While the songs help to express the young people's sense of loss and alienation, they also suggest a rich Arabic cultural heritage and express a tenacity and fortitude that the young people take pride in and enjoy sharing with one another.

A Small Box in the Heart deals with the alienated experience of those forced to leave home, but even more significantly, with the plight of the individual who no longer feels that she can find a place in her own society. According to Salem, the suffering of the citizen who feels alienated in her own country is worse than that of the exile who longs for home, perhaps because the exile may still hold onto the possibility of return to a place of familiarity and belonging. Although the themes of alienation and exile are hardly unique in Egyptian literature, or Arabic literature more generally, Salem brings them special poignancy with skillful use of shifting temporalities, the language of folklore, stream of consciousness technique, dream narrative and song. Salem's narrative calls to mind a Woolfian technique, albeit perhaps with a more economical prose style, as she explores the dialectic between present consciousness and memory. This exploration generates an intimate portrait of a woman who feels that society's trends towards consumerism, over-development, and religious fundamentalism, along with corruption at many levels of society, have somehow left her behind.

Because the novel works within the space of memory, it is characterized by multiple temporalities. These multiple and shifting temporalities work to disorient the reader, thus inviting him or her to experience some level of the emotional distress of the narrator. But the emphasis on the memories of people and places past also helps to develop the sense of loss which drives the narrative, loss of a past in which local people worked together for the community, of long-term relationships that are forced to an abrupt end, and at moments, loss of passion for life itself in the face of overwhelming obstacles to living a personally fulfilling life.

Ultimately this is a novel about longing; the longing for human connections across gender, generations and national boundaries. It explores longing for some aspects of the Egyptian past, but the author does not wax romantic about ‘traditional’ Egyptian culture. Certainly, Maryam’s childhood neighborhood is portrayed in positive terms as one of the old quarters in which people of different ethnicities and faiths—Muslim, Christian and Jewish—all shared a communal life, and recognized and even participated in each other’s religious traditions. According to Salem, this type of community used to exist in Egypt, and it represents a sort of tolerance that has become much less common.² However, any longing for the past expressed in the novel is itself fractured, recognizing the traumas of colonial experience and an oppressive police state, and the limitations, pressures and burdens that Egyptian society has always placed upon girls and women.

While the novel focuses on Maryam’s experiences of loss and longing, the shifting narrative upon which the novel is structured allows for multiple interpretations of these experiences. The memory and mourning that characterize the narrative are

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² Author interview, Cairo, May 10, 1992.

polysemous. They certainly suggest a profound sadness, but Maryam's memories of her strong and defiant younger self stubbornly assert the possible impact of the active and creative individual. The consciousness that informs the narrative is melancholic, but at the same time it remains persistent and questioning.

At the close of the novel, Maryam leaves the home of her friend Kawthar, a woman who has adopted a fundamentalist approach to religion and life, and to whom Maryam can no longer relate. Salem subtly alludes to Kawthar's transformation in several places throughout the text, as this young woman begins to cover her luxurious chestnut-colored hair first with a scarf, and then later with an all-encompassing robe and *niqab*, and whose once playful personality has become staid and cool. Salem also represents Kawthar as adopting the pious language of the ultra-religious, laden with formality and invocations to God and the Prophet. As she walks away from the alienating encounter with Kawthar and toward the Nile, Maryam's spirits are buoyed when she hears strains of Bayram al-Tunsi's ode to the Nile floating through the air: "Neither we nor you have an equal in sweetness..." Salem's invocation of al-Tunsi's love song and tribute to the Nile, suggests that despite her experiences of economic hardship, political oppression and personal loss, Maryam still feels great affection for her country and harbors hope for its future. The novel leaves open the question of where this positive emotion will ultimately take Maryam.

The Old Quarter

Cairo



Every era has a voice.

The night, silence, and longing take shares of you.

They surround and overcome you.

What's going on with you and this singing of yours, Maryam? Why don't you let on?

You wander the alleys trying to flee your own oppressive days. With an exhausted spirit you ask yourself, 'Are you a wicked woman, or are these just wicked times? Or maybe you're just betting on a losing horse for the thousandth time?'

You set out alone with heavy steps as the hours pound down upon your head—alone with the muddy sidewalks, the shops, the wash lines and dark balconies. Passing between the juice shop and the corner store you reached the old house overlooking a café. You flung yourself

down on the first chair that you saw, cast off your shoes, and stretched your legs out over the edge of the table.

Your mother always used to pride herself on repeating popular sayings. The veins in her neck bulged as she exclaimed, “By God it’s true!” You and the other kids would race around her until your endless prattle and mess provoked her into wielding her beaded slipper and chasing you all over the house. She was still uttering proverbs at the end, when strands of white hair had crept across her head, and the diabetes had stolen into her beautiful eyes, leaving its own black imprint. She used to say, “Listen girl, keep close what I say as though it was an earring on your ear. Life is give and take. If you help someone one day, they may help you out the next.”

You’ve betted all your life, Maryam, and there is no escape left for you—except for this house, your grandmother’s house.

Barefoot, you got up and began to move amidst the old furniture, and your grandmother’s spirit descended to accompany you. You stopped in front of her faded portrait and scrutinized her eyes. Suddenly a ray of light shone out from the picture. You walked past it and arrived at the bedroom where your grandmother’s chest stood in the corner, alone and silent.

You approached the chest. Opening it slowly, the ray vanished, and dust covered your face. You rummaged through its contents and unfolded between your hands a dress edged with Najafi-style embroidery. Dusting it off, you realized it was the dress your grandmother wore on her wedding night. You kept this all these years, Grandmother, despite its dingy color, and the holes that moths left in the fabric. And what is this? Grandfather’s tarboush...but where is its lustrous tassel?

Grandmother, I remember that you used to squat on the *kilim* in the hall, with the alcohol burner and the little coffee cups in front of you, and a container of snuff and glass jars containing

sugar, milk and ground cloves by your side. We used to talk and laugh together, and I revealed to you my first pangs of love for the neighbor boy. I told you about our secret rendezvous in the courtyard and on the rooftop terraces. You turned over your coffee cup and said, "It's just child's play, you'll forget all about him when you're older."

An absent minded expression had stolen over your face that day, Grandmother, as you told the story of your own first love. You were eleven years old and he was Hassan, your paternal cousin whom you had known all your life. You grew up together in the countryside, climbing trees and catching frogs and chasing gleefully through the fields.

You considered him the handsomest boy in the village. His mother always used to fear that he would be struck by the evil eye. But you, Grandmother, used to worry about the other girls and the evening walks along the bank of the canal, since an evil Nile nymph had taken up residence in the canal waters. She was a creature of enticing beauty, half human, and half jinni. If she took a liking to one of the youths she would snatch him on the spot and carry him off to her kingdom in the depths. As soon as she got him there, a wedding ceremony bound him to her, and no one would find so much as a trace of him. Nothing would remain of him at all, but over the course of time, his tale would be told.

What was destined came to pass one day, when the Nile Nymph saw Hassan swimming in the canal, naked as the day he was born. She praised God for his handsome form exclaiming, "Glory to God the Creator, this is a gift from heaven!" She let out a cry that frightened you, Grandmother, as you carried the clothes up the bank. Still just a young girl, you called, terrified, for your cousin. Upon hearing your screams, Hassan came charging out of the water, and the two of you raced, breathless, into the safety of the trees on the bank.

The moon contracted, the crows cawed, and a dark cloud descended between Hassan and the water. The Nymph struck her cheeks, rent her gown and howled over Hassan's escape. But she never forgot him. As for his mother, she wandered the streets with the little ones trailing behind, banging pot tops and metal cups to ward off evil. Then she placed a piece of bread, a pair of scissors and an amulet under his pillow.



The family moved to the city and as they read the *Fatiha*¹, they promised you and Hassan to each other, Grandmother. But the Nymph's great passion did not subside, and she announced her feelings across the sky and throughout the city's alleys and quarters. She pledged a pearl from her eye to the sun and a cherry from her breast to the moon hoping to win their cooperation in her search for Hassan.

And so it happened one evening at sunset, Grandmother. You were walking with your cousin in the long street leading to the river when you came upon a woman full of feminine charm. In that moment when the sun and moon met, the sky's eye flashed and Hassan had disappeared into the bosom of the river with the Nile Nymph.

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You dusted off your grandmother's kohl jar, Maryam—that ancient silver kohl jar whose cap was a hand engraved in the Islamic style. You used to watch your grandmother as she applied a line of kohl, drawing a fine black line along the edge of her eye. You had copied her, and even though your eyes began to water, you persevered in the attempt. You lifted the top of the kohl jar cautiously. An apparition emerged from the jar and presented itself to you saying, “Your wish is my command!”

You backed up, frightened, scrutinizing it. It was the apparition of your grandmother. Immediately you uttered formulas requesting the safety for which man and jinn have always

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¹ The opening chapter of the Qur'an, which is customarily read at the signing of a wedding contract.

been willing to exchange the treasures of the world. The apparition disappeared as though it had never been.

You returned to the box and lifted the edge of the shawl that your grandmother had knitted while you crouched at her feet holding the ball of yarn. Sometimes the ball would slip from your hands, and you would crawl after it, under the chairs, the table, and the silver cabinet. That cabinet was so beautiful, you used to stand in front of it for hours, gazing at its shiny glass, the small pieces of china painted with flowers and girls and boys, the teapot with the small neck, gleaming silver spoons and coffee and tea cups and fine utensils of different sizes.

Your grandmother inherited the silver cabinet from her mother, who had in turn inherited it from her own grandmother. And thus time continued to wait, resolutely, for your own long delayed wedding, Maryam. Ahhh, but when will that be? Only a few folks are still betting that you will settle down.

You sat between silence and longing. The winter night grew old and the nagging pain in your heart wouldn't cease. Leaning your head against the back of your chair, you gulped down the stinging smoke from your cigarette and then slipped on your shoes and walked along the passageway leading to the bedroom. You closed the chest and stretched out on your grandmother's brass bed. Melancholy lyrics came to mind... *'I love you and I wish, if I were to forget you, I would forget my soul along with you'.*²

You tossed and turned restlessly on the bed and were just about to start singing Abdel Halim's song...but no, Grandmother, the thing with the neighbor boy Saeed was never just a matter of child's play.

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² Lines from Abdel Halim Hafez's song "Ahwak" (I love you).

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Your heart fled back to the old quarter, where you and Saeed used to live in the same building. It was an old, classically-styled building with high ceilings, spacious balconies and delicate Romanesque molding on the walls.

Umm Safeer, the Copt, was a tall woman whose kind, beautiful eyes set off her bronze complexion. Her husband was a slight man with receding hair and thick eyeglasses. He worked in a pharmacy located on the corner, and dispensed medical advice and the like to all the other residents of the building. Together they had two daughters, Buthayna, and Ahlam, and a son named Safeer. On the holidays you would always find Umm Safeer proudly dressed, her face elegantly made-up. She would send a tray of hot, spicy bean patties to your mother, and your mother would always dress you up and send you back to her with a tray of “balilat al-^cashura”.³

Then there was Umm Meena the Armenian, who had a dazzling white complexion and sea-blue eyes. Her son was one year older than you, and her daughter Theresa was two years your junior. Both were pale like their mother. Their father, Abu Meena, was a businessman whose motorcycle was the object of frequent fights, as the neighborhood boys vied to steal a ride on it. Abu Meena would hurl threats at them from his balcony, while his wife tossed her dirty washing water onto their heads.

Another neighbor, Umm Saeed, was a cheerful woman with a tawny face. She had two sons, Saeed and Ahmed. Saeed was your childhood friend, Maryam, your confidant in all your little secrets. You knew his whistle when it came from the courtyard of the building, and you

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³ A porridge dish usually served on the 10th of Muharram to commemorate the death of Hussayn at Karbala. Hussayn was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad (626-680).

would hurry down to him to resume your gleeful play. The two of you used to carry on, talking, squabbling, then making up again. You would go to school together, and return home along the same street, buying hot, sweet potatoes and doum fruits. You used to throw your school bags onto the pavement and play in the street until weariness overcame you, and you became aware of the time you had stolen out of those innocent days. You slung on your bags, and raced off, betting on who would reach home first. Then, after slinking away to the roof, you sat and exchanged secrets. There was nothing between you but the transistor radio and your joy, as you hummed along to the songs of Abdel Halim and Nagat.⁴ Sometimes the two of you would make colored paper kites and you would launch them off—up...up...up they went—outstripping the neighbor kids' kites. Your hearts soared with them, as though they were flying across the sky behind the migrating birds at the hour of sunset.

Umm Rachel was the extremely heavy widow who lived on the ground floor. Her late husband Zaki had been a well-known bag merchant in the neighborhood, and she inherited both his money and his cleverness. She was also a seamstress, and the sound of her machine could be heard throughout the building, day and night, as she stitched all types of clothes; for summer and winter, for feasts and for holidays. Her daughter Rachel was an introverted child, afraid of

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⁴ Salem refers here to the songs of Abdel Halim Hafez (1929-77) and Nagat al-Sagheera or al-Sughayeera (b. 1939). Hafez became famous for his patriotic songs in the 1950s and 60s and crowds again sang these songs during the Egyptian revolution of 2011. His romantic songs also became iconic in Egyptian culture. Sagheera was also famous for romantic songs. ("Remembering Abdel Halim Hafez, the voice of revolution", [al-Masry al-youm Online](#), June 21, 2011, accessed December 1, 2011).

playing with the other children. She contented herself by helping with the housework and sewing until she became just as skillful as her mother. Despite the fact that she was Jewish, Umm Rachel used to say that she was proud of being Egyptian and she repeated over and over that she would always live in Egypt, and be buried in its soil.

Every Friday, you would look down from the back window, Maryam, as you waited for Saeed's whistle. The moment you heard it, you would charge down the stairs, your feet hardly able to restrain themselves. Then he would count up all of the few piasters that you had between you and you would take off like two little birds, heading for the park with the swings, the carousel, the pianola and the 'box of the world'. Together you would jump onto one swing, Saeed pumping his legs with joy and vigor and you pumped along with him, the two of you clinging with your slender hands to the chain. Higher...higher! You clung together in the air, screaming with fear-tinged elation. Whirling around you was the carousel—and with it the sky, the earth, and the people.

You heard the call...Come! Come see the 'box of the world', a world of wonders in a box of wonders! You raced each other as you followed the call, and perched upon a small bench behind a large wooden box with a black cover. On one side was a metal crank turned by the contraption's operator, a man with dyed hair, colored pants and a purple shirt. You stuck your heads into the box and a black curtain descended over your heads. Your eyes widened as they gazed at the pictures that flashed before them, pictures of the prince and princess, the evil magician and the beautiful woman, the dwarves and the man with the scepter, Abu Zayd and

Zanati Khalifa.⁵ As the man turned the crank, the pictures whirled by. “Click, Clack” went the crank...

Here is the gallant prince riding his horse and wielding his sword and shouting with determination in his voice: “Come out of your houses, I am Abu Zayd al-Hilali, hero of heroes, prince of princes. I come in disguise but my sword is drawn. I have traversed the cities and the countryside on my horse, pounced on the necks of the enemies, and I have given freedom to the oppressed.”

Click, clack... “And my goodness, here is ‘The Lady of Goodness and Beauty’ running happily through the fields. The sun sings to her and the birds guard her, but... poor thing...here comes Umm al-Dawahi creeping along, disguised as a peddler. She tempts the Lady with an apple and then the Lady falls unconscious. And here is the handsome prince – see him? He beheld her beauty and called upon God the Merciful, and as soon as he came near her, the magic curse was undone and her spirit returned to her. She lived with her Prince happily ever after and they had many sons and daughters.

Click, clack. “And here is the ugly daughter of the Sultan. No one but a young Arab lad was brave enough to lay eyes upon her as she passed with her retinue. From that day on she was in love with him but when he refused to return her affections, she cast an evil spell upon him. In the end, the Sultan’s daughter was defeated by a trick and she fled, and no one knew what became of her.”

Your heads were pressed together, you and Saeed, under the black cover of the ‘Box of the World’, gazing at the pictures and listening carefully to the stories until the box went

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⁵ Heroes of medieval Arabic oral literature who were both known for their justice and efforts to help the poor.

completely dark and the crank stopped turning. Then you ran off to another spot in the festival grounds, each of you hiding a little box of memories deep within your little soul.

Tee tara tee tara...

After filling your heads with stories, you made your way towards the sound of the pianola...

Tee tara tee...

Clapping and dancing to the melodies, you whirled around the pianola player. He struck an odd figure with his powdered face and cap; fitted out with loose clothes and a walking stick. He turned the pianola crank, and hummed and danced to the tunes, enjoying himself along with the children spinning around him.

When the music finished, you and Saeed returned to your meandering, hands interlocked. You stopped in front of a target shooting game. Small firecrackers dangled from strings and everyone—young and old—tried his luck. The one who made the target got a toy, a doll, a stuffed bear, a wooden flute, a ball or perhaps a toy rabbit or horse.

You grasped your rifle, Maryam. You were aiming for the doll with the red dress, white shoes and orange ribbon, and Saeed was aiming for the toy bear. You put your hand on the trigger and took aim—but the shots missed the mark, flying off into the air. You threw yourself onto the ground in anger, your eyes choked with tears. Said grasped the rifle and hit one of the crackers. Jumping around joyfully, he requested the doll instead of the bear and gave it to you, Maryam. You smiled, ready to succeed this time. You grasped the rifle firmly and confidently, took aim and hit the mark, and presented the bear to Saeed.

As you continued walking, you called out to the man selling fortunes, and bought pieces of candy wrapped in cellophane paper. You ran to the corner of the sidewalk, put the bear and

doll aside and unfolded the papers. Words appeared in small, delicate letters on Saeed's fortune, and he read, "Your love is fire." He laughed. You opened your fortune, Maryam, to find the lyric: "Me, my suffering, and your love."⁶ Together you giggled and ate the candies and tucked your fortunes into your pockets.

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You stopped tossing and turning on the bed, Maryam, got up and headed for the bathroom. Slipping off your clothes, you inched your body into the shower. As you worked the drops of water into your steaming skin, you suddenly felt like singing one of those old songs by Abdel Halim.

"Be true to me once

Turn away from me another time

But don't ever forget me

Be true to me once..."

You relaxed a little bit after showering, Maryam, and then stretched out on the bed to enjoy a few moments of tranquility.

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⁶ The title of well-known song by Mohammad Abdel Wahhab (1907-1991) in which the singer describes the suffering involved in love. Love in Arabic songs is often associated with suffering (for both men and women).

He called out to you from the heart of the square. Turning around, you found yourself facing a tall, darkly-handsome youth, whose honey-colored eyes gleamed with intensity.

“Saeed!”

Recovering from your surprise, you shook hands and crossed the street, dodging the speeding cars as you headed for the nearest sidewalk. Hands interlinked, it was as if the years had never separated you, as though that fateful day had never occurred.

Your father had suddenly announced his decision to move the family to a distant house in the suburbs of the city, near his new job. On moving day you had clung to the railing of the stairs, while Saeed stood with his back against the wall. When the moving van arrived, he hid in the courtyard of the building, alone, his eyes choked with tears.

You walked to a nearby park and sat down under a luxuriant green tree, barely containing your questions. “Do you still live in the old neighborhood?”

He stretched his body out on the grass. “Where else would we go?”

You raised your head to the sky and drew a deep breath. “Ahhh...it’s a small world.”

He smiled, “And beautiful just like your eyes.”

As you both laughed heartily, the dimples showed in your cheeks, Maryam. Saeed stood up and brushed the grass off his clothes. “Let’s go!”

He stretched out his hand to help you up.

You asked, “Where are we going?”

“Home...mother will be so happy to see you!”

You welcomed this idea, and walked proudly through the streets hand in hand with Saeed.

Ahhh...Maryam, every place has its distinctive scent, and the old quarter has a smell of familiarity and love. But a strange feeling overcame you as you got nearer and you thought you must be lost. You said, “Are you sure this is our old street?”

“Yes.”

“But...?”

Unfamiliar sights struck your eyes. Gone were the verdant trees that used to stretch across the street, providing an umbrella of shade. A multi-level shopping center had been erected in the place where the old corner store and small wares shop used to stand. More than one apartment building stood in the place of the old low-standing houses and even the cinema had vanished, a tourist café having sprouted up in its place.

Your heart is no longer warmed by sight of the old houses and the tall, shady trees. Gone are the cinema, the swings, the carousel, the ‘box of the world’ and even the fragrance of fresh flowers. As the two of you approached the house, a stooped old man came into view, but the two trees that used to stand on either side of his doorway had disappeared.

Silenced reigned over the building’s foyer. Where was the clamor of the children in the courtyard, or the sound of Umm Rachel’s sewing machine or the unintelligible shouts of Umm Meena with that foreign accent of hers?

Saeed interrupted your wandering thoughts. “Be careful, there is a broken step here.”

You leaned on the banister watching out for the broken step. Ohhh...Umm Saeed no longer opens her door to anyone passing by as she always used to do—Umm Saeed, you were a peasant woman with a loving heart and a stalwart spirit that saw no need for stories or excuses, and when it came time for justice, there were no favorites.

You called out to her in the way that she always liked, “Auntie Umm Saeed!”

She appeared in front of you immediately, Maryam, her arms stretched out towards you. She drew you into a powerful and loving embrace. Eyes overflowing, she said:

“Come in my girl, a thousand welcomes! You’ve brought light to this house!”

Your eyes roamed around the place. The walls had been painted white instead of the old yellow. But where was the old Egyptian-style sofa in the entryway? In its place sat a gilded French parlor set. And the parlor itself was bigger, perhaps because a wall had been removed. Now a large picture with a black border dominated the room’s central wall—it was a picture of Abu Saeed.

You uttered, “The deceased will continue to live through you Auntie, may you continue to live and remember.”

She shook her head. “May your own life be long, my dear...my how time has passed!”

You replied, “Thanks, Auntie.”

The old lady winked her eye at her son Saeed and said, “Thanks to you my dear, and to Saeed and Ahmed”

You asked her, “By the way, where is Ahmed?”

“He has gone to live with his uncle in Saudi Arabia and is working there.”

You sighed, “I hope he returns home safely.”

“God willing...” She wrapped her black veil around her face. “I hope I have the joy of seeing them again before I die.”

“You will, Auntie.”

She smiled, “Our destiny is in God’s hands...we are guests on this earth.”

Umm Saeed gazed at you and her eyes twinkled. “My goodness, you’ve become a beautiful girl, Maryam. Tell me, where are your mother and father and your brother and sister?”

You shook your head, Maryam, “Mother passed away.”

She murmured, “There is no strength nor power except with God, we are from him and to him we all return.”

You continued, Maryam, “And my father is well, my sister and I see to his needs.”

Umm Saeed interrupted you, “And your brother, where is he?”

“Ahhh...he went to the Gulf ten years ago, he used to come back during his vacations, but lately he’s stopped coming.”

Umm Saeed shook her head. “It must be hard living so far away in a foreign land. But tell me—what I want to know is—how are you all doing living in that house of yours, so far away from here?”

“I’ll tell you, Auntie, people there aren’t close. Neighbors don’t know each other. Yes, the streets are clean, but they’re also empty—no one is around! To tell you the truth, I’m not comfortable there. I spend most of my time at my grandmother’s.”

The old lady raised her eyebrows, “By the way, how is she?” Is she still strong, does she still have that high voice? Does she still have her teeth? By God, she is a woman who knows the fundamentals, she would never visit the building without knocking on every apartment door to see how everyone was doing.”

Saeed stood up to take his leave. “Excuse me.”

His mother turned her face toward him. “Where are you going?”

He replied hurriedly, “I’ll be right back.” And he left quickly through the open door.

Umm Saeed grasped the back of her chair, trying to stand. “Excuse me my dear, I forgot to ask you, what would you like to drink?”

You stood up, Maryam, exclaiming, “Relax, Auntie, I know where the kitchen is.”

Your eyes sparkled, and you added, “How about if I make two coffees sweetened just the way you like it, on the condition that afterwards, you read the coffee grounds just like you used to!”

Umm Saeed smiled, revealing her missing front teeth. “My goodness, Maryam, you still remember?”

“Huh, what did you say?”

She shook her head. “As you wish, I’ll have coffee without sugar.”

“Without sugar?”

“My diabetes, dear, I hope you never suffer from it.”

“I am sorry to hear it, Auntie.”

“I’m managing.”

“I know...”

You turned to the kitchen and gathered together some coffee and utensils, singing softly,

“Love came to us, came to us

Love tossed us aside, discarded us.

Your eyelashes were as dark as the night...

We were enmeshed in love.”

After lighting the butagas stove, you swirled the coffee over a gentle fire. Silence thundered from behind the kitchen window, which gave out onto the central light shaft of the building. In the old days, the building always resounded with the racket of Umm Meena and her kids, Umm Safeer’s kids, and the whirring of Umm Rachel’s sewing machine.

You had noticed it immediately upon entering the building with Saeed: a large rusty padlock on Umm Rachel’s door. As you climbed the stairs, Umm Meena didn’t open her door in

welcome as she always used to do. It was her habit to run to the threshold of the building behind her children, and her son Meena would slide down the banister faster than the wind.

The coffee was ready, revealing a caramel-colored froth on its surface. You got the small cups ready and poured the coffee, being careful not to let your hands tremble, and you put the tray on the table in front of Umm Saeed. The two of you finished sipping the coffee and you watched Umm Saeed as she turned your coffee cup over onto its saucer. Moments of silence, tension and anticipation ensued between the time Umm Saeed turned over your cup and when she righted it again.

Cup in hand, she brought her face close to yours, “Look, my dear.”

You drew together, and your breaths mingled as you looked at the interlaced lines that streaked the inside of the cup. You listened carefully.

“There are open paths and closed paths. But before you is a stream, your path will be green—God willing—and a dark-skinned young man extends his hand to you, do you see him?”

You examined the interlocking swirls and lines, Maryam, for something that might suggest itself in the pattern.

The old lady finished, pointing with her index finger, “There is a package waiting for you, may God soon bring you a happy ending.”

Then she knitted her brows. “But...”

You held your breath for a moment, listening.

“There is a hole in your path.”

You exhaled, “A hole?”

Umm Saeed put the cup back in its place, replying,
“God is our guardian, my daughter.”

You glanced at Umm Saeed's overturned cup and said,
"What about you, Auntie, aren't you going to read your own fortune?"

She shook her head. "I have already known my fate for a long time and have accepted it, thank God."

As your eyes roamed around the place, you noticed the absence of the old dining room table, the empty cabinets and the ebony hook upon which Abu Saeed always used to hang his tarbush and his mother of pearl inlaid cane. Abu Saeed had been a handsome man, despite being slightly lame in one leg—the result of a childhood fall from the top of a cart loaded with his sister's bridal furniture.

As for Umm Saeed, she had been a strong woman in her youth, someone people always took into consideration. She had an unbounded jealousy for Abu Saeed, the source of which was really the blonde, blue-eyed Armenian woman, Umm Meena.

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Umm Saeed looked down over the banister, following her husband's morning descent to work, when she noticed Umm Meena standing in her doorway, her hair flowing down over a thin-strapped diaphanous gown.

The blood boiled in Umm Saeed's veins and she shouted, "Have some modesty woman, instead of stopping and flirting with every man who passes by!"

Abu Saeed passed Umm Meena quickly, head down, his feet flying down the stairs in an attempt to escape the situation entirely.

The neighbors opened their doors and Umm Meena called out in her broken Arabic,
"You mad at me because I beautiful?"

Umm Saeed tore down the stairs and before she could come to blows with Umm Meena, Umm Safeer got between them. Your mother yelled from up above as people began to gather, “Pray to your prophet, Umm Meena, if you have one, and keep yourself and your children out of trouble!”

After the situation had calmed down and all the doors had been closed on their inhabitants, your mother descended the stairs with you, Maryam, following behind. She rapped on the door and as soon as Umm Meena opened it, your mother said in an authoritative tone, “Get dressed and come with me.”

Umm Meena asked no questions, and in a matter of seconds she stood behind your mother, fully dressed. Then your mother knocked on Umm Saeed’s door, and when Umm Safeer opened it, Umm Saeed could be seen sitting in the middle of the parlour. Your mother entered, with Umm Meena behind her and you too, slim-bodied Maryam, passed through the gathering mass of bodies into the parlour.

Silence reigned.

Your mother interrupted it, “For God’s sake, settle down, Umm Saeed, it’s OK!”

Umm Saeed muttered, “You’re right, may God protect me from the devil’s temptation.”

The women sat watching each other.

Umm Safeer began the discussion, “What do you think, should we go and light candles to the Virgin Mary?”

Your mother replied, “Yes, by God, I have made a vow that I must fulfill...

What do you think, Umm Saeed? Do you want to come with us?”

Umm Saeed nodded her head, “God willing.”

“And, you, Umm Meena?”

Umm Meena replied quickly in her thick accent, “Course, my dear, everything by God’s will.”

Umm Saeed laughed and Umm Meena found an opportunity to make amends. “I really do love you, Umm Saeed.” She raised her hand to her head, adding, “I was out of my senses because of Abu Meena and the children!”

The women laughed, and Umm Meena stood up to kiss Umm Saeed on the head, but Umm Saeed shuddered and stood up saying, “God forgive me!”

The two women embraced.

All the women sat back down, more relaxed now, and Umm Rachel entered through the open door and looked around.

“Is everything OK, ladies?”

Umm Safeer nodded her head.

“Everything is fine, sister, come on in.”

Umm Saeed brought the alcohol burner, the brass pot and the little coffee cups. When the cups had been drained, she turned them over to read the fortunes etched in the grinds.

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You looked at your wristwatch and shifted your eyes between Umm Saeed and the door. When you caught the tap of footsteps on the stairs, you got up eagerly, “Saeed!”

Umm Saeed lowered her head to conceal a smile as you ran to the door. Sure enough, it was him, carrying a package from which thin wisps of steam rose.

“I’m back!” He said, crossing the threshold, his forehead bathed in sweat.

You took the package from his hand, Maryam, and the two of you quickly headed for the kitchen, but Umm Saeed stopped you, insisting that you leave it to her, and when you objected, Saeed grabbed your arm and drew you away saying, “Don’t bother, believe me, she doesn’t like to have anyone in the kitchen with her.”

You shrugged your shoulders.

“Anyway, I brought grilled fish so it won’t need any preparation.”

You gave in, Maryam, and happily went outside with Saeed to stand on the balcony.

Looking around you said, “My, this is such a narrow street!”

Saeed shrugged his shoulders. “The buildings are tall, that’s why it seems so stifling.”

You leaned over the balcony wall to see to the end of the street and said, “Do you remember, Saeed, the swings and the “box of the world”? And the pianola and the Realto

cinema...Do you remember when we used to jump over the wall and mill around in the crowd and watch all those carnival shows?"

He smiled, "And when we used to go to the church with Safeer and his sister Buthayna, and Meena, and we used to eat sugared almonds on holidays and celebrations and...by the way... you know Meena always had his eye on Buthayna."

"Really?"

"Yes, he used to take her off into a corner and they would whisper together and when my eye caught Buthayna's, she would blush and look at the ground."

You laughed, "Tsk, ts...I never knew you had such a naughty side!"

Saeed continued, "And do you remember the burning hiding we got when we stayed late at the cinema? Your brother and Ahlam and Safeer were with us."

Nothing interrupted your laughter until Umm Saeed called from inside, "Come on in dears, the food is ready!"

You raced into the house just as you had done when you were small, and sat side by side, the food spread before you. Saeed cut some fish and placed it in front of you.

You stretched out your hand invoking God's blessing as your mouth watered.

Umm Saeed smiled, saying, "May you live long to support us, my son."

"Everything is thanks to you, Auntie."

He watched you as you busied yourself with the food, "Enough, Maryam, take it easy!"

Umm Saeed replied, "Leave her to eat as she pleases, son!"

He looked at you smiling. "She's not eating, she's gobbling!"

Umm Saeed laughed as your face inflated with rage, Maryam. The rest of the fish caught in your throat and you coughed. Saeed handed you a cup of water.

After you gulped down the water, you replied, your eyes streaming, “Excuse me!”

Umm Saeed said, “Finish your food, my dear, and don’t pay any attention to him.”

You lifted your hands from the food, saying, “Thanks, Auntie, I’m finished.”

Saeed said, “Excuse us mother, Maryam and I are going for a little walk.”

She nodded her head, “As you like, son, I’ll go pray the afternoon prayer.”

After you had gathered up the dishes and washed them, Maryam, you ran, bursting with joy, behind Saeed. In the street you took his arm and the two of you headed toward the river. Saeed jumped up onto the Corniche wall and held out his hand to help you up. The two of you sat down, and the Nile made you three. He rested his arm on your shoulders.

“So what are you up to these days?”

“I’m looking for work, and you?”

“I have a temporary contract with an import-export company and I’ve begun graduate studies. I’d like to finish them in America.”

You raised your eyebrows in surprise, “America?”

You contemplated his tawny skin and his warm eyes and said, “And then, are you planning to come back, or...?”

He frowned and was silent.

You turned your face away from him. “In any case, it’s your life, you’re free to do what you want!”

With the tips of his fingers he held your chin and turned your face toward his until your eyes met. “Of course I’ll come back.”

He pointed with his index finger to the other side of the river saying, “Look over there, close your eyes and dream, you’ll find what you wish for, anytime, faster than you can imagine!”

You gazed at the other bank of the river, searching for an inspiration.

You repeated, whispering, “I wonder what tomorrow will bring?”

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Sleep left you, Maryam. You got up, wandered about the room, closed your grandmother’s box, and sat on the edge of the bed, asking yourself, “When did your spark go out?”

You heard screams, followed by crying and a clamor and the sound of windows opening and doors locking. The noise came from across the street, from the coffee shop that had once been called “Café Mary”.

Mary had been the wife of Amm⁷ Ibrahim Hamama, that handsome, dark-skinned man who had loved sailing the seas ever since his youth. On one of his trips to Greece he fell in love with a beautiful girl, married her, and brought her back to his country, hoping to settle down. He opened a coffee shop and made it a meeting place for people of the quarter, and out of his immense love for his wife, he named the place after her. He was extremely proud of her sweetness and fastidious nature and he used to praise her soft skin, slender build, her wavy red hair and violet eyes.

Hamama was also proud of the fact that he adulterated the wine that he served to the foreigners in the days of the British occupation. He used to put a large quantity of methylated spirits into the wine along with a measure of cheap flavoring. He would shake it vigorously and

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⁷ Literally “uncle”, this term is a respectful way to refer to, or to address an older man.

then call what he produced “aged wine”, the likes of which could not be found anywhere else on the face of the earth.

Hamama also used to hide students fleeing from British fire during the demonstrations. He would open a door for them in the back of the coffee shop that led on to his house and shelter them until the street was calm and they could be on their way. Every evening in the café, Hamama used to tune the radio to the voice of Umm Kulthum, for whom he had a passion until the end of her days.⁸

Mary was always devoted to the cleanliness and organization of the coffee shop. She also had gramophone on which she played Greek music and she took requests for songs from her clientele. She liked collecting old coins and postage stamps from countries that she had visited, along with keepsake pictures of her childhood and youth, and of her trips with Hamama on board boats sailing from one place to another. Mary stored all these small things in a box inlaid with mother of pearl, which had a key of such a size that it would sprain the fingers. She kept that key hidden under the carefully folded clothes in her antique chest.

Most of the customers loved Mary for her warm personality, her happy countenance and—above all—for her fierce love of Egypt. She was a woman who hated occupation wherever it existed on the face of the earth, and she helped her husband to prepare the tainted wine for the English soldiers. She also helped him to shelter the students who were fleeing from the demonstrations. She took in these young people who had no other place to go, and let them buy drinks at a discount.

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⁸ Umm Kulthum (1898-1975) was an Egyptian singer who was famous across the Arab world. She was also known to her fans as “The Lady”.

Mary was assiduous in lighting candles to the Virgin Mary, hoping that her Lord might grant her a son. She remained childless for many years until her creator deemed her worthy, and she gave birth to a boy. She used to fast and give alms along with Hamama, and donated money and clothing to the mosque as she did to the church, making no difference between them. She was full of compassion for the poor and when she died, the people of the quarter mourned her deeply.

Hamama was powerfully affected by her death. He had loved her passionately and had had no conflicts with her except concerning her coddling of their son, Sayyid. Hamama was always warning her that she would spoil him after he discovered that she was giving the boy money behind his back—in fact, giving him everything he wanted without expecting anything in return.

Hamama did not live long after her death. Death came suddenly one night as he was sitting up and listening to ‘the Lady’. Mary had been buried in Egypt according to her will, and Hamama joined her as if they had agreed to stay together both in this world and in the next.

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A loud bang rang out in the neighborhood and you knew, Maryam, that it was a gunshot. The wailing ceased, the screaming subsided, and the muttering stopped. Along came the Police van with a crowd of policemen rushing and jostling alongside it. The Officer burst into the café, his men right behind him. They overturned the tables and the water pipes, beat the intoxicated patrons on the backs of their necks, herded them out of the café and piled them into the van. At the head of the mass of men was Sayyid, the son of Hamama, and the sole inheritor of the café.

The policemen broke down the hidden door and confiscated the little sacks of bango and hashish that had been packaged for distribution, along with the pills and drug-filled syringes, and they left the café in a ruin. Then the officer ordered his men to search for ‘the Mongoose’ and ‘the Pounder’.

The Mongoose was a slightly built man famous for being a slippery character who could make a quick get-away by leaping across the roofs of the houses. He had a knife scar on his left cheek and fox-like eyes, and he could sniff out danger wherever he was and disappear with the wind.

As for the Pounder, he was stout, dark-skinned and had piercing eyes. He never took a step without a switchblade hanging from his belt. Both young and old gave him a wide berth. He used to start cutting the hashish at high noon in the alley behind the café. The Mongoose, the Pounder and Sayyid would gather on the sidewalk outside the café at the end of the evening to pass around a waterpipe filled with hashish. They also used to heckle the passers-by until a fight inevitably broke out to round out the evening’s events. This was all carried out with a careful placement of lookouts on the street corners and under the auspices of the quarter’s Police detective, with whom they had a solid relationship.

In the days of the depression, when the government had the place by the throat, they adulterated the hashish and mixed the bango with cheap herbs or chopped *mulukhiyya* leaves. The Mongoose would ride his bicycle, circling around the groups of youth and people that used to meet on the corners and alleys of the city’s quarters. Sayyid would remain in the coffee house cellar, filling the bags of tainted bango with the aid of the Pounder. They would work in the very same cellar that used to serve as a hideout for the students fleeing British bullets.

And you, Maryam, still behind the window watching attentively, noticed Detective Sarwat, with his corpulent, flaccid body and his hulking feet and bulging eyes, standing outside the café after the departure of the police van. Next to him was his rusty bike, leaning up against one of the subdued old houses. You could not figure out why Detective Sarwat kept watching you—even now that your hair had started to gray and you had given up on the world—he still kept an eye on you, despite his swollen legs and failing vision.

One time, you had noticed him following you all over the place, from the green grocer's to the fish market to the bus stop, and through the passages, alleys, quarters and upper class districts, and finally to the train station. When you heard the sound of his panting and the distinctive whirring of his bicycle you quickened your steps until he finally caught up with you on his rusty bicycle, his breath rattling.

He pleaded, “For God’s sake Maryam, enough! You’ve made me dizzy running around looking for you!”

You stared at him, screaming, “You’re the one chasing me around in circles!”

In an unrelenting tone, he replied, “Look, lady, I am just carrying out orders. I need to submit a report or else...”

You pushed him with your hand, “Forget the report and all this nonsense. It’s you, no offense intended, who has lost his senses. You’ve nothing better to do than ride around looking for me?”

He had wheeled his bike away muttering, dragging his defeat behind him with heavy steps. You followed him trying to remember the last time you had played a game of cat and mouse, Maryam. It was at a demonstration you had attended, where people were demanding an end to rising prices only to find themselves confronting the security forces. You’d had to flee,

and hide away for awhile to escape notice of the security detectives, but because the matter was over quickly, the defeat had been even quicker.

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You and a number of your school mates had searched for someplace suitable for hiding away. You found, after some difficulty, a place at the end of Haram street. It was an apartment on the ground floor with three rooms and a parlor. Two rooms opened out to each other and there was a third one secured by a padlock hanging on the door. You haven't forgotten—and never will forget—the sight of the building's owner Mrs. Zizi, a woman in her late forties who wore her hair dyed a bright red color. Her face was stained with various powders, she had a full figure, and kitten-like eyes. The amount of gold she wore caught the eye as it lay heavy on her neck and wrist and jingled when she walked.

You were four girls with a compact to live in disguise: Layla, Sabra, Zahra, and you, Maryam. Tall, fair-skinned and freckled Layla would go out one day veiled, and on another day she would sport a blonde wig. As for Sabra, she was a dark-skinned, slightly-built girl with high shoulders. She would go out once wearing a gallabeyya and a veil, and another time wearing a wig, and yet another time wearing jeans and a short-sleeved blouse. You, Maryam, sometimes wore the wig on your head and sometimes the veil. At any rate, the wig made the rounds amongst the four of you.

Zahra was the intermediary between the apartment and the outside world. She would go out early in the evening and not return until dawn, and sometimes she would even spend the whole night away. Zahra was on the thin side, with short hair and round eyes. With time, you

girls attracted the attention of the neighborhood and as they say, “You made a spectacle of yourselves.”

One day, the landlady Zizi showed up, her weighty bangles jangling on her arms and a heavy gold necklace lying on her sturdy chest. She arrived leading a tall, dark-skinned man in his early thirties. He wore his hair greased back with Vaseline, sported a striped suit, and carried a large bag in his hand. But what really caught the eye were his pencil thin eyebrows, his kohl-lined eyes and his swaying gait. Mrs. Zizi wanted to put him up in the third room—with who? With you four girls! This idea was certainly not going to fly, and you girls refused immediately. Your refusal soon escalated into abuse and false accusations from Mrs. Zizi, while the man stood in the corner and contented himself with watching the spectacle. The situation would have become a hand-to-hand scuffle if Mrs. Zizi had not taken the strange man by the hand, and led him away from the place, all the while threatening to punish you.

In the morning of the following day, you girls were startled awake by a violent rapping at the door. At first you all rushed around in circles, but it was not long before you got hold of yourselves and, mindful of circumstances, silently communicated with your eyes. Layla rushed to open the chest in the old Ottoman under the window in the parlor, and Sabra helped her to gather the assortment of clothes, and to scatter them out onto the tiled floor. With amazing speed she lifted the wooden box containing the remaining pamphlets that had not yet been distributed. You and Zahra ripped the pages out of them and threw them into the toilet. Then each of you tucked her personal and University IDs into whichever piece of clothing she had thrown on.

In the time that it takes water to run through a sieve, the Police chief had forced the door open and stormed into the room, with Mrs. Zizi and two policemen right behind him. It was no surprise to you that the State Security apparatus should show up at your apartment, but you were

shocked by Mrs. Zizi's accusation of theft. Of course you denied it, but within minutes a careful search of the apartment revealed a necklace behind the back of the Asyuti-style chair, and two gold bracelets hidden amidst the clothes inside the wardrobe.

You realized too late that the cursed Zizi had a copy of the key and, while you were sleeping, had carried out her secret attack, planting the 'stolen' jewelry. The police van was parked at the head of the main road, and in order to reach it you had to traverse a long, narrow alley. You walked one after another, with the people standing along each side watching the procession. Your screams were of no avail, and you were put under arrest.

You tried to recover your calm and agreed to present your IDs and say that you were students living away from home in a furnished apartment, and that it was your bad luck that you had landed at Zizi's place. But as your detention lengthened, you went back to screaming and banging. The Second lieutenant responded to your protests by screaming back at you. Finally, in the face of your insistence on seeing the Police Superintendent, he submitted to your demand.

And so, you stood lined up in front of the Superintendent who looked at each of you, one by one, as if he was saying, 'What is it that brings together the blonde and the veiled girl?'

Quickly you got out your university IDs and put them on his desk. He studied them, his glance moving between the pictures and your faces.

Then he stood up, and passed in front of you asking, "Aren't you girls from good families? Aren't you ashamed of yourselves for stealing? Did they teach you that in college?"

Sabra answered quickly, "We were looking for a furnished apartment for which we could split the rent equally. The broker sent us to Mrs. Zizi and..."

The Superintendent interrupted, "Who are you talking about...Zizi?"

Zahra added, "Sir, you know that 'The stranger's eye is feeble.'"

Layla hurried to back her up, “What’s more, Superintendent Sir, this accusation is a trick because she brought this hulking man and she tried to force us to let him room with us, and you can see, Sir, that we are all girls.”

And you, Maryam, said, “And Sir, you can see by our looks, no offense intended, we’re not that type.”

Sabra burst into tears crying “God protect me from the slanderer!”

In a strangled voice Zahra said, “She’s a clever woman, may God protect us from her evil doing, and...”

The Superintendent interrupted you, “Enough...hush! You and her...I’ve had enough this morning!”

Silence fell over the room. The Superintendent pressed a button on his desk and a soldier appeared immediately, saluting.

“Get me Officer Fawzy! The soldier saluted again, turned around quickly, and hurried out of the office. Only moments later Officer Fawzy was in front the Superintendent, his gaze moving between him and you girls. The Superintendent shouted, pointing at the telephone, “Get me that damned Zizi!”

The officer leafed through the pages in a notebook on the desk and quick as lightening, had Zizi on the line. The Superintendent grasped the telephone receiver and sat back in his chair screaming,

“What’s going on, woman? You think we don’t have anything to do besides dealing with you?”

There was silence as he listened to Zizi’s response, and then he burst out, “What are you talking about... stealing... who do you think you’re kidding?”

The Superintendent listened to Zizi's voice once more before erupting, "That's enough! Now come and withdraw your complaint on the record and if you don't, I'll turn my back on you and your whole family will suffer!..." "All right...its over, I don't want a fuss!"

Furious, he slammed down the receiver, gathered the IDs in his hand, gave them to the Officer, and addressed himself to you girls, "Next time, you'd better be more careful. I don't ever want to see your faces here again!"

The Officer handed you back your IDs one by one, and after the official procedures were finished, you took to your heels and flew out of the place.

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An ambulance siren pierced the air. You stretched your neck out the window, Maryam. The ambulance workers were lifting up a man whose intestines were dangling from his abdomen. Another man had his arm severed by a bayonet. Among the other injured were people with knife wounds to the face, and bruised, beaten bodies.

You shut the window and collapsed into the seat next to it, resisting nausea. Pain ran down your spine. You walked sluggishly, leaning on the wall, and in a moment, you fell with all your weight to the floor. Who could help to revive you, Maryam?

Your friend loaded his passion for life onto his back and left for distant lands. Do you think he will return? Or will life in America suit him? Ahhh, Maryam, will that be the end of you? That you'll fall down once and not have the strength to stand up again? You resisted going to the doctor on several occasions...would it turn out to be what they call "loss of desire to live"?

You tried to stand up, supporting yourself on the arms of chairs until you reached the bedroom. Insomnia tore up your bedclothes. You gulped down a tranquilizer pill and fell asleep for a short while.

There you are ascending the stairs... hands tied... a guillotine appears to you at a distance. Ugly metallic faces turn around it, screeching like crows:

Let's splatter her with dirt!

Let's fling filth at her!

Let's smash her and scatter the fragments of her corpse!

And they went on...and on...

Here you are, hiding in a time other than your own time, and yearning for the one who will gather up your bones. Your soul is imprisoned in a cycle of losing wagers, you are driven to mistakes, the mistakes lead you to foolishness, and the losses transform you into a monster.

The guillotine looms large and tiger-like, you draw near and it creeps toward you. You stop climbing, you turn your back on it and collapse onto the stairs. The circle of accusing voices continues to tighten.

You woke up from your distraught sleep, Maryam, and felt your neck. Thanking God that it was still there, you turned on the light in the room; everything was in its place. Grandmother's chest, the brass bed, the kilim and the old wardrobe. You uttered an invocation seeking refuge in God from accursed Satan and you tried, once again, to sleep.

You heard the meow of a cat and sat up. Uff...what had woken that cat at this hour? You put the pillow over your head and the cat continued to call, “Daouuud!” The night was wintry and the hissing of the kerosine stove intermingled with the meows of the cat outside the door.

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Your Aunt was still turning the butter with her long wooden stick. The fire blazed with blue flames. Gathering around the fire and stretching out your small hands towards it, you and your siblings were warmed by the stories. The story that night was about the Prophet Suleiman who could speak to the birds, animals and reptiles. Auntie told about how the sea became stormy and the winds turned dark with grief upon Suleiman’s departure. The birds and the animals lost their ability to speak after his death, except for the cats whom the jinn inhabited, and who continue to call “Daouuud” in lament and longing.

You asked in surprise, Maryam, “Auntie, why don’t the cats call Suleiman?” She hit your hand with the hot stirring stick saying, “Girl, the cats are free to cry as they will, what business is it of mine if they call Suleiman or Daoud? They are all prophets!”⁹ You dropped your head and continued listening to your aunt, who soon drew you into a new story.

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⁹ The aunt has things confused. According to Islamic tradition, Prophet Suleiman used to talk to animals, but here the aunt tells the children that the cats are calling for Daoud, or the Prophet David, not Suleiman.

And here you are...your head like a dead weight on the pillow. The cats' meows don't stop, nor does sleep come.

You got up heavily, hunger gnawed at you. You headed for the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. There was nothing in it but a piece of cheese and the remains of the fish from yesterday's meal. You lit the oven and warmed the fish as you busied yourself chopping garlic and searching for the cumin that somehow eluded you.

You were dying for some pickled vegetables, Maryam, and you looked at the glass jars that were devoid of anything except a layer of dust. Your grandmother had always been intent upon carefully lining up the little glass jars filled with cumin, black and red pepper, fenugreek, mint, cinnamon and anise. When she needed more of anything, she would send you to Amm Girgis's spice shop to fetch it.

Amm Girgis was a gentle man who spoke little and was always eager to please. He was famous for making herbal remedies for various illnesses and he always tended to the needy before those with wealth and influence.

You used to play with his daughter Sonya, and with Kawthar, the daughter of Amm Farag the grocer. One day, when you were heading to your grandmother's house, a slender, barefooted girl grasped the hem of your tunic and pointed with her little hand:

"Go talk to her!"

Her face was dirty and her chestnut-colored hair tousled. And then as quickly as she had appeared, the girl ran off. You had turned around, Maryam, to see what the child was pointing to, and you noticed Kawthar gesturing to you.

Kawthar was the only daughter of Amm Farag, the grocer. A man with a kind face and gentle features, Amm Farag always responded to the requests of his customers pleasantly and with a smile.

His shop was always clean and neat and he was patient with the poor when it came time to settle bills. In those days, the people of the neighborhood shared in both the good times and the bad.

Your grandmother used to sit, squatting under a weak ray of light that fell from the one window that gave out onto the street. She listened to the neighbors' gossip and the movements of the passers-by on the street, and to the calls of the vendors, the arguments, the shouts of children, and the voice of "the Lady" coming from café "Mary".

Grandmother used to cover her face and shake the sieve between her hands, sending the rice hulls flying in all directions. She would call out to you, "Come my dear, Maryam!"

Leaving your seat, you would hurry toward her, "Yes, Grandmother!"

"Open the cupboard and take half a riyal from the purse".

You would open the fabric purse and listen to grandmother's instructions.

"Run and get us some sweets and cheese and come right back!"

You would fly out the door, Maryam, not only to get the requested items but also to play with Kawthar. Kawthar was about the same age as you, a beautiful, charming and mischievous girl, whose light brown hair fell down upon her back and whose black eyes glittered whenever there was a chance to play. The two of you ran around, far from the grocery shop, playing hopscotch and hide and seek, racing each other down the street to the passage leading to the river, slipping off your shoes and allowing your feet to be moistened and caressed by the water. Then you would climb up onto the grass and—completely immersed in the exhilaration of the

moment—you would race again, this time through the trees, only to vomit up the *hummus assham* and the cotton candy in which you had indulged.¹⁰ As usual, you were late returning to your grandmother and you endured a scolding along with the loss of the half riyal.

You walked toward the shop and when you got close, you found Kawthar standing at the door waiting for you. She was wearing a headscarf and after you embraced, you cried playfully, “I have missed you, you rascal!”

She straightened the scarf on her head and replied, “And I missed you more! What are you up to these days?”

You nodded your head, Maryam, “I’m fine.”

Kawthar sighed, “Praise the Lord, the generous, forgiving and merciful.”

One of the customers called out to her.

You patted her on the shoulder, Maryam, “Stay well!”

She called, “But it’s still early!”

You smiled, “I’ll stop by another time...”

You turned your back on the shop and were overcome by the longing for Saeed, the years of childhood and youth, and for the old quarter.

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¹⁰ Hummus Assham is a hot spicy drink made from whole chick peas.

Part II: Emigration

Baghdad

Grasping the letter in your hand, you walked toward the old building, Maryam. You asked the policeman standing in front of the iron gate, “Does Mr. Aziz Amin work here?”

He nodded toward the interior of the building. “Ask at the information desk.”

You entered a stately reception hall, which featured a large gold-framed picture of the President of the Republic in military dress, an enormous crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, and a Shirazi carpet covering the floor and stairs. A large elevator stood in the middle of the hall.

You entered the elevator and went to the second floor as they had instructed you at the information desk. A sign hanging on the wall read “Cultural Affairs.” You entered and wandered between the empty desks, until you reached the lone occupant of the room who was sitting and reading a newspaper.

You greeted him, “Hello.”

He lowered the newspaper from his eyes. He was in his forties, and had thick hair, narrow eyes and a thin mustache.

In his Iraqi dialect, he said, “Hello, what can I do for you Miss...?”

“Maryam, Miss Maryam.”

Still holding the newspaper, he said, “Please sit down.”

You sat asking, “Is Mr. Aziz here?”

He shook his head. “He’s on his way.” And he returned to his newspaper.

You looked around at the long room with its high walls and crowded desks. In the center of the room stood a brass map outlining the regions of the country.

Two men arrived and greeted you, “Hello.”

You and the man with the newspaper replied simultaneously, “Hi.”

The first man folded up his newspaper and stood up to take his leave. “Excuse me, Miss.”

“Sure.”

You drummed your fingers on the edge of the desk, keeping your eyes glued to the door.

•••••

Cairo

“The Good Mood Café” was located in a downtown alley that branched off from a main thoroughfare. It was the meeting place for various and sundry types; students, intellectuals, politicians, artists and ordinary citizens.

The café was packed with chairs and tables which spilled out onto the sidewalk and into the adjacent passageway that was located between two buildings. The three of you sat together amidst the smoke rings and the clicking of the dice.

The original proprietor of the café had been a stout, dark-complected man with heavy lips, buckteeth and kinky hair. He always wore a loose, flowing gallabeyya and sat in the café smoking his water pipe with obvious enjoyment. He would sit there, vigorously blowing out puff after puff, until his eyes had become glassy and he began to cough. He was always surrounded by his many customers who used to spend their evenings chatting, laughing and enjoying the atmosphere of the busy café. When he died, his sons and grandsons were careful to maintain the café as the meeting spot it always had been, and to keep its name “The Good Mood Café”.

“At your service, Miss,” said Amm Mistika. The most senior worker in the place, Amm Mistika had an elongated face, white hair, black eyes, and a thick mustache. He always wore a clean gallabeyya, and a towel folded with care over his arm. In the pocket of the apron that he wore during work hours, he kept a small notebook in which he recorded all the drinks on tab.

Shihab said, “But you already know our order, Amm Mistaka!”

The waiter turned on his heel and yelled, “Get me two teas, a medium-sweet coffee, and set up the hookah with molasses flavored tobacco!”

A voice on the radio chanted,

“The village head man had a son and Oh, he is joyful!

Happy at last, he is celebrating with a party as big as a wedding!”¹

The three of you continued your conversation.

Shihab said, “Have you finished the paperwork?”

You replied, Maryam, “I submitted my passport...”

The third of your trio, Ahmed, said: “I don’t see why you have to leave, Maryam.”

Ahmed was a poet who composed in formal Arabic.² He was a small, slender man with a wheaten complexion. Shihab on the other hand, wrote poetry in colloquial Egyptian, and was tall, slender and wore thick glasses on his prominent nose. Shihab used to get into heated arguments with Ahmed, especially when the conversation turned to discussions about the relative merits of formal and colloquial poetry.

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¹ A song by the Egyptian singer Shafiq Galal.

² The Arabic language has multiple levels or registers. The poet Ahmed mentioned here writes in an elevated, literary style very different from the ordinary Arabic that people speak everyday.

He said, “And since when, Sir, do you understand ‘necessity’—you who writes in a language the people can’t relate to?”

Ahmed, annoyed, replied, and you think that you are the only one who understands? You and your so-called “popular poetry”. He counted off on his fingers a number of famous poets who wrote in formal Arabic. “Look man, you have Ahmed Shawqi, al-Ma^caari, Salah Abdel Sabour, Ibrahim Naji, Umru al-Qais and Abu Firas al-Hamdani and...”

Shihab cut him off. “Alright, skip the sermon, brother, I was wrong.”

You said, Maryam, “Good lord, guys, I am leaving my country even though I have no desire to. But what can I do? I can’t continue being unemployed, and there are no opportunities for work and settling down here, I’ve had it!”

Surprise registered on Ahmed’s face, “Unemployed...since when?”

Shihab responded irritably, “Don’t you live in this country? Have you forgotten that people rose up in the street like flood waters when the government raised the price of bread?”³

Ahmed rubbed the hair on his head. “I think that business happened over three years ago, when I was out of the country, working on my doctorate in Hungary.”

Shihab shook his head. “Yes, yes, I remember”. He cast a sympathetic glance your way, Maryam.

He said: “What’s going on with you and Saeed?”

You shook your head.

“You know...”

“What?”

You shrugged your shoulders.

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³ A reference to the 1977 Egyptian Intifada

“You know...”

Shihab knit his eyebrows, “What’s going on with you, Maryam, you can’t say anything beside that?”

“I really just don’t know...”

Worn out by sorrow, you were silent for a moment and then said: “You know, Saeed went to America and after a while I just stopped hearing from him.”

Silence descended upon the three of you.

Amm Mistaka returned and served the drinks. He stacked the tobacco holder of each water pipe with layers of tobacco and charcoal until the coals crackled. Shihab took puff after puff, blowing out thick smoke.

You took a gulp of your hot tea, Maryam, “Really, the thought of leaving my own country is killing me, but what can I do? I can’t find a way to make a living and I can’t guarantee what the future will bring.”

Smoke rising from his lips, Shihab replied, “Can any one of us can bet on tomorrow?”

The cups of tea and coffee began to circle around with the smoke rings. The shouts in the café rose with the clatter of the dice, while the voice on the radio crooned...

“I hope Umm Hassan is well

*Safe from the evil eye...”*⁴

You asked Shihab, “Have you written the letter?”

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⁴ Scattered throughout the narrative are portions of this song written by Ahmed Adawiyya and sung by Umm Kulthum (see also pp. 102 and 106) Salem represents this song as one that runs repeatedly through Maryam’s consciousness, perhaps reminding her of popular songs that she heard during her childhood in the old quarter of Cairo.

He took an envelope out of his shirt pocket and handed it to you, saying, “I told him to take care of you.”

“Thanks.”

He shook his water pipe: “Amana sends her greetings to him and tells him that he should take courage.”

You nodded your head, “Done.”

You turned over the envelope, contemplated the name written on it and read in an audible voice: “Aziz Amin.”

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Baghdad

Men began to crowd into the place, the office became congested with people, and the noise of the intermingling discussions rose to a drone. Suddenly, a clamor arose in front of the door, and people began to look towards it. You put your briefcase over your shoulder, Maryam, and decided to take a look.

Two men were quarreling.

One of them screamed at the other, “I am free, brother, and I have the authority to edit and delete words as I want!”

The other replied, “No you don’t have that right. No one, no matter who he is, has the right to change a single letter of what I have written without consulting me first.”

People began to break up the argument, some of them grabbed one of the disputants and took him down in the elevator and some took the other party into the office, sat him down at his desk and tried to calm him down, “Watch out for yourself Mr. Aziz, it’s not worth it...”

Then the group around him dispersed, each person returning to his own desk.

You approached Aziz’s desk with quiet caution, Maryam, and stood for a few moments observing him while he straightened up his papers.

You asked yourself, “Is this the Aziz you’ve been looking for?”

He was a medium sized man, with a wheat-colored complexion, light brown hair, a delicate nose and hazel eyes.

The man who had met you when you first arrived at the office came over, and as soon as he saw Aziz seated at his desk, he turned to him and said, “This young lady was asking about you.”

Then he moved to his desk and buried his head in his papers.

Aziz raised his head, his hazel eyes pierced yours, Maryam, and you blinked.

He stood, extending his hand. A ring set with a large blue stone on his finger caught your eye.

He said, “Hello.”

You extended your hand and shook hands with him.

“Maryam Abdel-Fattah.”

He grasped your hand firmly.

“Aziz Amin. Please sit down.”

You sat down on a chair facing his desk.

He said smiling, “What can I do for you?”

You took the letter from your handbag and gave it to him.

He opened it curiously, reading in a whisper and then burst out joyfully: “I can’t believe it! Shihab, that scoundrel!”

He leaned back in his chair, expanding his chest, “Ahhh... even the paper smells of home!”

You looked into his shining eyes, Maryam, and said, “He sends his greetings and tells you to take courage.”

He gazed at you firmly. “Thank you. Will you have something to drink?”

“I wouldn’t mind...”

He folded the letter and put it in his pocket, exclaiming, “Why don’t we get out of here, get some fresh air and we can talk at ease.”

You nodded, “Not a bad idea.”

The autumn air greeted you the moment you emerged from the building, and you strolled down a long street crowded with shops of various types, pedestrians, old buildings, hotels, cafés, newspaper kiosks and cars. Entering a side street, you headed for a koshari place, and took a seat at a table overlooking the street.

That was the first time that you met Aziz, Maryam. Shihab had told you one time that Aziz was Palestinian. And here the two of you were, in a strange city, separated only by a small wooden table set with salt and pepper cellars, little bowls of salsa and spices, and a metal pitcher. It was as if you were in Sayyida Zaynab or Bab Sha[‘]riyya.⁵

Aziz broke into your ruminations. “I’m so glad you arrived safely!”

You smiled, “Thanks!”

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⁵ Popular districts in Cairo.

He took a letter out of his pocket, unfolded it and smoothed it out with his hands.

“I miss Egypt so much!”

“Did you spend a lot of time there?”

“About twelve years.”

He brought his face near yours, “You know, I just want you to keep talking, I’m dying to hear the Egyptian dialect and the Egyptian spirit—especially when it’s on the tongue of girl as sweet as honey.”

You blushed and bit your lips, whispering, “You’re sweet...”

The waiter approached, a man in his early thirties, with a dark complexion and the features of a country youth.

He said, “Can I take your order Mr. Aziz?”

Aziz looked up at him, “Hi Ahmed, how are you?”

The young man’s accent emboldened you, Maryam, “Are you from Egypt?”

“Yes.”

“From where?”

“From Shubra.”

“Home of the best folks. Have you been here long?”

“Almost five years.”

Aziz broke in, “And you haven’t yet been able to put away enough for the dowry and the price of an apartment?”

Ahmed grimaced, “It’s still early.”

He wiped his hands on the bottom of the apron that he was wearing over his clothes, took from his pocket a picture of his fiancé and handed it to you, Maryam.

You studied it. She was a baby-faced girl with almond-shaped eyes and a lovely smile. She couldn't have been more than seventeen.

You said, "Good luck to you!"

Aziz looked at the picture and said jokingly, "She's as lovely as the moon, and wasted on you!"

Ahmed laughed saying, "What can I get you?"

Aziz replied, "Two specials."

"Fine."

"And why don't you add a lot of chili pepper."

The waiter put the picture back in its place and moved away shouting, "Two specials here and make 'em good!"

You looked out the window, Maryam.

The crowd in the street had begun to thin and the car horns had quieted.

You said to Aziz, "I see everyone knows you around here!"

"Well..."

Another waiter brought the dishes, quickly lining them up on the table, and then moved efficiently on to the next table.

The smell of the spicy sauce, peppers and salsa made your mouth water, Maryam.

The two of you dug into the koshari with delight, and after you had finished, Aziz leaned back in his chair stretching and gazing intently at your face.

He said, "You know that your eyes are lovely."

You smiled.

He added, "...and your hair is wild... and what can I say about those dimples?"

You laughed, avoiding his glances.

“Look brother, how beautiful this girl is, her beauty is truly Egyptian.”

You stopped laughing, Maryam, and said, “It’s clear that you exaggerate...or are you just a flirt? You should know, I also have a tough side.”

He lit a cigarette and offered you one, but you refused, making the excuse that you don’t smoke right after eating.

He blew smoke rings in your face, saying, “What’s new with Shihab?”

“He’s OK, but he doesn’t laugh like he used to.”

“Really? The best thing about Shihab was his laughter. I wonder...does he still write poetry?”

“It’s the only thing he’s got left.”

“You know that we used to be really close. We used to stay up late, walking around all the streets and different quarters of the city, from Hussayn to Sayyida to Old Cairo and the Citadel and Midan Opera and Fuad Street. We’d chat until dawn at the coffee shops and go to all the hangouts, and the political, cultural and artists’ circles. We also participated in the demonstrations, the last one was in ’68, before I was deported from Egypt.”

You recovered from your surprise. “You were deported?”

Sadness crept into his voice, “It’s a long story, let’s talk about it later.”

Silently he gazed out the window, at the ancient buildings and the passersby in the street.

The waiter lifted the dishes from the table, cutting off Aziz's ruminations.

“What would the lady and gentleman like for dessert?”

Aziz said: “I’d like *mahlabeyya* pudding.”⁶

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⁶ A creamy, milk-base pudding often flavored with rose water.

Just like a child, Maryam, you said, “I’ll have rice pudding.”

The waiter turned away.

Aziz smiled. “Do you know the joke that goes: Once a guy asked his mother, ‘Do you want to get married, mom, or would you rather I bring you *mahlabeyya* pudding?’ And the mother replied, ‘Who me? You think I have the teeth to eat *mahlabeyya*?’

You laughed, and when the order came, Aziz took a heaping spoonful of rice pudding and brought it to your lips. You blushed, and looked away.

Aziz said in a tender tone, “Taste it...you are forgetting that Shihab asked me to take care of you!”

It was as if you had known him for a long time, Maryam, as if he was sitting with you in a dining room or café back in Egypt. Feelings of familiarity and affection crept into your heart.

Aziz put his cigarette out, and began to devour the bowl of *mahlabeyya* as you ate your pudding. After both of you had finished the food, you took a tissue out of your hand bag, wiped your hands and mouth, and handed one to Aziz.

He lit a cigarette and pushed his chair back from the table, asking: “Where are you staying?”

“With some relatives of ours, just until I find some work.”

“And have you found anything?”

“Nothing, but I am still looking.”

He puffed out the smoke, saying: “Give me a couple of days to ask around and I’ll see if I can find you some leads.”

You nodded, “OK.”

Aziz clapped and the waiter came quickly to gather the plates, saying, “To your good health!”

Aziz took some money out of his pocket. “The check.”

You walked to the door, Maryam, he caught up with you and the two of you headed toward the bus stop. You shook hands and agreed on a time to meet again.

.....

Cairo

Dawn was about to break.

You were depressed with the place and with life, Maryam. It was no longer possible to adapt to this desolate era—not under any circumstances.

You curled up on the floor in the corner of the room, staring at the ceiling.

.....

Your small hand had trembled in Saeed’s as the two of you slipped quietly into the bedroom.

The house was completely still, and so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. Everyone had gone off to the funeral of a man from the quarter.

You threw down your school bags, kicked off your shoes and crawled under the bed.

Saeed played the role of the father. Frowning, he said, “Did you get the food ready?”

“Yes, and the children are asleep.”

“Good, come on...let’s take a little rest.”

You stretched your little body out on the cold floor under the bed. Saeed undid the suspenders of his shorts and stretched out his hand to lift the hem of your school smock as elation stole into your aroused body. He tried to kiss you and you withdrew bashfully. He came nearer and touched you and you embraced him as he embraced you. Bathed in sweat, you kissed.

Suddenly, you heard footsteps and you both held your breath. You pulled down your dress, Maryam, and Saeed pulled up his suspenders.

Both of you curled up in a corner under the bed until the footsteps had faded away and you were certain that no one was around. Quickly, you crawled out from under the bed and scampered away like frightened mice. Simmering with both newborn ecstasy and terror, you flew up the stairs and away from the scene of the crime.

.....

You were making the the rounds of the house, Maryam, when your grandmother’s spirit took possession of you.

You remembered how the steam used to fill the bathroom as grandmother dipped the jug into the hot water and poured it over your head. Gathering her damp gallabeyya between her thighs, she would scrub your naked back with a rough loofah. But when she turned to your chest, you would bashfully fold your arms over your two protruding lupine beans. Grandmother used to laugh, wipe her forehead with the back of her hand and then continue scrubbing your little body.

As you reminisced, you poured the warm water over yourself and murmured words from an old song, “*You who are by the pond, go to the ocean...*”

.....

Baghdad

Ahhh...Maryam...how you long for a moment of warmth...why does the day drag on so?

You met Aziz on the sidewalk outside the building where he worked.

He raised his face to the sky, “Looks like it’s going to rain.”

The square was packed with pedestrians and cars, the buses were jam packed and the car horns were relentless. The sky darkened as low clouds gathered. People dashed across the streets nimbly while school children leaped about joyfully in the rain.

Aziz grasped your arm, “Come on!”

He pointed to a taxi. You two of you squeezed into the small car. The rain poured down heavily as the driver began to cut through the crowd and across the muddy ground. Aziz put the collar up around your neck, Maryam, and he understood from your surprised glance what you wanted to ask him.

He said, “We’ll go to the house until the rain lets up.”

“But...”

“We’ll talk later.”

You arrived in a residential area whose new buildings and open spaces stood in contrast to the crowded downtown. Date palms and tall buildings sheltered paved streets with gutters that drained away the water and made them seem to sparkle. Even the cool wind had a different scent than those dust-laden breezes of other areas. Aziz told the taxi driver to stop in front of a building on the corner of the street.

You said to yourself, “I wonder, are things here really as they seem?”

Why did you come here with Aziz, was it out of a feeling of safety, or out of curiosity?

On the whole, he had never been anything but respectful towards you.

The two of you walked a short distance and stopped at the entrance to the house.

Aziz gestured with his hand, “Please, come in!”

You were reluctant to enter.

He frowned “You don’t trust me?”

He stood looking into your eyes, and said, “If you doubt for a moment that I am an honorable person, go back!”

You grasped his hand. He smiled and preceded you up the stairs.

You started up the stairs tentatively, Maryam. The house was silent except for the howl of the wind in the staircase.

Aziz got to the top before you and stopped at the third floor. He poked his head around the banister and yelled.

“Where’s your spunk?”

You responded irritably, “You live with our Lord above?”

He laughed, “No, he lives with *me*!”

You gathered your strength and hurried up the final stairs. The apartment was on the top floor. You leaned your back against the wall, panting. He turned the key in the door.

He bowed, saying, “Enter my princess.”

You were offended as soon as you entered Maryam, by the stuffy odor and the mess. Cigarette butts were scattered everywhere, along with remnants of food and books and papers. You lifted some newspapers off a chair and sat down to catch your breath.

Aziz ran to the kitchen, and his voice rang out from within, “Tea will be right up!”

After you had taken a moment’s rest you got up to look around the place, Maryam. A large desk occupied the middle of the sitting room. Books were scattered chaotically on shelves, and an iron and some clothes sat atop a classically-styled dining table next to the desk. Spongy chairs surrounded a circular wooden table. In the corner of the room was a tape player piled with cassette tapes. A buffet on the other side of the desk bore a small brass candelabra with two thin candles. An old picture of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus hung on the wall.

A small passage joined the sitting room to the kitchen and bathroom, and another led to the bedroom and to a door that opened out onto the roof terrace.

Aziz came out of the kitchen carrying a tray of tea and put it on the table. You, Maryam, were still standing in front of the buffet staring absently at the picture of the Virgin.

Aziz exclaimed happily, “Tea, my beautiful lady!”

You smiled, Maryam, and sat down to drink the tea with him.

As the warmth began to spread through your body, you said, “Thank you, this is just what I needed.”

Holding his cup with both hands he replied, “This is green tea, a friend of mine from Tunis gave it to me.”

You looked at him, surprised. “You seem to have friends all over the world!”

He replied sorrowfully, “People are all that is left when you have neither money nor voice.”

You nodded your head. “You’re right.”

The rain let up and the two of you finished sipping the tea.

He took you by the hand saying, “Come on, I’ll show you the view!”

He opened the door to the roof and you walked out onto its wet surface, pushing aside laundry lines that were empty except for lingering drops of rain. You stood together before the terrace wall. Aziz stretched his arms and took in a deep breath.

You cast your eyes, Maryam, toward the towering date palms, the verdant, intertwining trees, the streets washed with rainwater and the minarets cradling the sky. You could see little birds flying around, trying to serve as decoys in order to protect their nests.

An abundance of green lay between two rivers, carrying the scent of history, the fragrance of dates and oranges, and the memory of the scepter and the crown.

Aziz patted you on the shoulder, interrupting your ruminations. "Where did you go?"

Your heart flew to the distant horizon and you said, "I miss Egypt."

He held your face in his hands. "Is this the first time you have been away from home?"

You gulped, "The first time."

He stroked your hair, smiling, "By tomorrow you'll be used to it."

The sunset call to prayer rang out over the houses of the city.

He put his arm around your shoulders, "We'd better go in."

You sat in adjacent chairs as the moments passed in silence.

Suddenly the electric went out and you tensed up in your seat.

Aziz got up looking for a source of light. He seemed to know the place like the back of his hand, because he got to the buffet without stumbling, and lit two candles. He walked back towards you carefully and placed the candles on the table.

He sat down, patting your hand sympathetically, "I'm with you, don't be afraid."

You stole a glance at his face in the dim light. His features reflected both determination and geniality. His eyes stole toward you, Maryam, through the space of the flickering candlelight.

He said, “You know, you resemble my sister.”

You smiled, “Really? What’s her name?”

“Zahra...you even have the same delightful smile.”

“Will you introduce me to her?”

His voice was bathed in melancholy, “The last time I saw her was about thirty years ago.”

Surprise bridled your tongue, Maryam. He leaned his elbows on the table, cradling his head in his hand, and you perceived his need to confide.

“We were three siblings and the world was vast and open before us. We ran around and laughed and played in the groves amidst the olive and orange trees. We fought and made up, and gallivanted around in the grassy fields as we listened to both the church bells and the call to prayer.

We lived on the highest tell; if we raised our hands we could touch the sky. Our eyes could embrace the mountains far in the distance. We were clever at making kites, we would color them, and fly them, and our spirits would fly with them...higher..higher...far above the other kids’ kites.

My mother was good at making *fitir*.⁷ We would wake to her voice as she was kneading the dough, and find her surrounded by the women of the neighborhood. My grandfather had his own way of doing things—while we liked to sit under the grape trellis, he always sought the shade of the orange tree. Tea, song, and late-night gatherings brought us together. I could always

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⁷ A traditional, multi-layered bread, eaten with cheese, honey or other toppings.

smell the scent of oranges in my mother's bosom, in my father's sweat and in my grandfather's beard."

Suddenly Aziz fell silent. He trained an angry glance on the dancing candle flames. Then he blew out successive puffs of smoke, Maryam, and returned to his story.

"It was the first time I heard gunshots close to our house or even close to Bethlehem. After that, the bombardment intensified, the laughter died, and our joyful childhood was over.

The destruction began to advance onto everything; the orange and olive trees, the grape vines, even the houses and gardens. It marched right into the garden of our home and had no mercy for my grandfather stretched out under his orange tree. That is, I doubt he died of sorrow before the gunfire reached him.

My father searched all over the house for my grandfather's rusty, long-barreled old rifle. He cleaned it with an old rag and left, leading my older brother by the hand. When their absence continued, my mother told me to suppress my tears, because it is shameful for men to cry. At night my sister Zahra and I hid in a corner of the house, crying and clinging to each other. Every day my mother uttered prayers and made supplications to the Virgin Mary and to Jesus. She lit candles, and despite all that, news of massacres continued to come.

One day, the bombardment intensified and the fire engulfed the people, the crops and the walls. It was the final blow for my mother, who quickly packed our clothes into a bundle and balanced it on her head. She carried a second bundle in her hand, with bread and provisions for the road. She hid a small fabric case in her bosom containing various items, including my father's silver ring set with a blue stone, and a picture of the Virgin. My mother put Zahra on her shoulders and galloped through the fire and the wailing. I followed, staying closer to her than her

own shadow. We hid in the woods; we climbed hills and descended back down them. Then we were piled into a rickety pick-up truck with others who were fleeing to the Jordanian border.

The candle dimmed and was spent.

Aziz hurried over to the buffet, and looked through the drawers for a new candle. His search yielded only one. He lit it and and cradled its flame with his palm. Then he stood it in the brass candelabra on the buffet. Heavy moments of silence passed. In the space of the dying light between you and Aziz, longing for home danced with the fire.

After a few minutes, light flooded the place, Maryam, and involuntarily you called out, “Oh!”

Aziz rubbed his eyes, “Good God, darkness is a curse!”

You got up suddenly.

Surprised, he cried out, “Where are you going?”

You drew your jacket across your chest. “It’s late!”

Aziz looked at his watch. “It’s only nine o’clock...it’s still early!”

He stood up, raising your face with his palm. “How about some coffee?”

You nodded your head. “OK.”

Aziz headed for the kitchen saying, “How do you like your coffee?”

Following right behind him to the kitchen you replied “Medium sweet.”

You came near him, “I’ll make it for you.”

He swirled the coffee in the small brass pot over the burner. “No—no offense—I enjoy doing this.”

You laughed and stood beside him. Together, you watched the coffee rise in the pot as it began to boil over a gentle flame.

Aziz lifted the pot off the flame carefully, saying, "By the way, I phoned an acquaintance at one of the newspapers to inquire about work for you, and he said that there is a temporary editorial position open. What do you think?"

Without hesitation you replied, "I accept, of course. What is there to think about?" He shut off the burner, opened the kitchen cupboard, took out two coffee cups and together you left the kitchen. He placed the tray on the table and you sat down.

He swirled the coffee pot and poured the dark liquid into equal measures. With the first sip you said, "Mmmm, perfect coffee, who taught you?"

He shook his head: "Life as a refugee."

He took out his pack of cigarettes and held it out to you. You drew one out and after another sip of coffee you said, "It seems like you've smoked for a long time."

He exhaled smoke into your face, without replying, and jiggled the coffee in your cup. You sipped your drinks in silence. Aziz threw his pack of cigarettes into the corner of the room, sat on the arm of your chair and played with your hair. You concealed a shudder that ran through your body. You put out your cigarette, and raised your face to look at him. A bridge of alienation and longing linked your gazes.

He stood, headed for the bookcase, and went through the books saying, "Do you like poetry?"

From your seat you exclaimed, "Of course!"

He returned to his seat carrying a book and sat down leafing through its pages. "This is a collection of an Iraqi poet named Saeedi Yusuf. Would you like to hear some?"

"I'd love it!"

He took a deep breath and began to read.

“A prophet shares my apartment

He lives in an oblong room

Every morning he partakes of my coffee and milk

And the secret of long nights”

His hazel eyes flashed. Shutting the pages of the book he turned his face towards you.

“Why did you leave your country?”

The question took you by surprise, and you cast a glance at the picture of the Virgin,

“There was no work!”

“Did you look hard enough?”

“I wore out my shoes looking. Egypt is not what it used to be, it’s become like a carnival market—chaotic and with no one in charge.” You swallowed bitterly, “People’s very emotions have become self-serving.”

He said, “Are you attached?”

You squirmed in your seat and bit your lip.

In a subdued voice you replied, “I had a friend, I would be lying if I told you that I no longer have feelings for him. He traveled to America to study and the years went by. He promised me that he would return but...”

He contemplated your sad eyes, eavesdropping on the strangled tone of your voice.

“Then I stopped hearing from him and my emotions were in limbo as I wondered whether or not he would return.”

He brought his face near to yours. “How long do you want to wait for him?”

“I don’t know.”

You regarded his sharp features and his kind eyes and said, “Are you separated from someone special?”

He let out a shrill laugh.

Irritated, you asked, “I said something funny?”

He stopped laughing, “No, not at all. It’s just that I myself am in a constant state of absence; absent from my family and homeland, absent even from myself, traveling from country to country like a lost bird. It’s hard to think of settling down.”

He lit a cigarette and then broke your silence, “There’s no need to worry—everything, from absence to exile—is hard at first, but habituation, as Camus says, sometimes has its own strength and power.”

You sighed, “Are you able to keep up your morale?”

He exhaled smoke into the empty space of the room.

“Sort of...I channel my anxiety into my work writing articles in newspapers and magazines. I publish some and others are rejected by the censors. The rest of the time I spend between friends and the Party.”

You raised your eyebrows, “The Party?”

“The Palestinian Democratic Party.”

“Really? Is there a party here other than the government party?”

He put out his cigarette, “You have a right to be surprised, it took a lot of time, effort and trouble to establish it.”

You exclaimed, “You were involved?”

“Yes, we were a group of intellectuals and political refugees, but we have not escaped observation and interference in our activities. You understand, of course, that we exist in the shadow of martial law and anything could happen. It is as though we are living in the palm of a genie.”

You gazed distractedly at the yellow color of the walls and looked at your watch.

You exclaimed, “I want to finish this conversation, but I should go!”

You stood up and put your bag over your shoulder.

He let his hand rest on your shoulder. “Don’t worry...I’ll take you home.”

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Cairo

The birds were chirping and you were still up, Maryam. You listened to the machine that makes the flour for bean patties, and to the radio blaring from the coffee shop.

“Good morning, listeners!”

Other sounds reached your ears; the drone of groups of students walking to school, and the clatter of the small wooden cart pulled by man selling *baleela* pudding. You covered your head with your grandmother’s shawl, took a deep tin bowl, and went out to join the crowd of people and children waiting in front of a shop to buy fava beans prepared with olive oil and spices, and hot bean patties. You were surprised that some of the stores were still closed, even though they had opened their outer doors at the crack of dawn.

You stopped by the bakery and stood in line until it was your turn. You put the bread under your arm, and carrying the steaming dish of beans in your hand, returned to the house. But you felt no appetite for the food.

You looked at the picture of your grandmother and saw her smile at you. You extended your hand toward her, “Please, have some!”

She shook her head firmly.

You broke the loaf of bread invoking God’s name and tackled the food and the memory of your grandmother. She shared the sustenance with you.

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Baghdad

You looked up and found the place lit up, Maryam.

Aziz’s flat was called “the airport” because it was always full of people of different nationalities and identities. You ran up the stairs, pressed the doorbell, and Aziz opened the door, welcoming you. Smiling faces greeted your entry.

Aziz began the introductions, gesturing to you, “Maryam Abd el-Fattah.”

Then he pointed to each of the others in turn.

“Ali, an ode player in the final year at the cinema institute. Suhayla, Ali’s sister. Marwan, a playwright from Syria who now lives in Geneva. Mazin, a childhood friend, he now lives in south Lebanon. Ibrahim, an amateur artist and friend from Egypt. Hamdan, a friend from Tunis.”

After an exchange of greetings, you sat down in a chair facing Suhayla and her brother.

Aziz said, “By the way, Ibrahim is a great artist.”

He pointed to a painting hanging on the wall, "That's one of his canvases."

The group turned their heads toward the painting of a human skull, within which a woman embraced her infant. She was surrounded by rocks and olive trees.

Ibrahim turned his face toward Aziz smiling, "Do you remember, we used to go around to the different neighborhoods, trying to catch glimpses of the girls under their wraps? Do you remember the ancient houses with those delicate wooden lattice windows and the scent of incense? Ahh.. that was a beautiful time. We would stay up until dawn in Sayyida Zaynab and Hussayn chatting and smoking water pipes."

Aziz shook his head smiling: "There's something you are leaving out!"

Ibrahim, with his Nubian features and wide forehead said, "Remember the first time you tried the water pipe...what happened to you?"

Aziz laughed.

Ibrahim stood up, imitating his friend. "After you took the first puff your eyes flashed and your face flushed the color of a carrot. You stood up, puffed out your chest and said, "I am a he-man and...smack! You fell flat on your face!"

The group burst out laughing. You felt a sense of warmth amidst this group and were eager to know their stories.

With the back of your hand you wiped away a tear of laughter, and said, "Pray God all turns out well!"

Mazin wondered out loud, "Why do Egyptians always repeat that expression? Its as if they think that happiness is too good for them!"

Ibrahim replied, "Because the Egyptian has drunk sorrow with his mother's milk. He's been the victim of invaders, occupiers, and all manner of rulers: after the Romans came the

Mamluks, then the Ottomans, the French, and then the English. People laugh out of helplessness, Mazin. Haven't you heard the saying that goes, 'The worst calamities are laughable'?"

Mazin's hawk-like eyes accentuated his sharp facial features. "I've heard it and experienced it, by God. People in south Lebanon spend their days hovering between death and life, every day—and despite that—they live. They eat, drink and laugh. The girls marry, get pregnant and give birth. Children grow up, there are moments of joy, evening chats, and sorrows. The young men learn how to bear arms and the mothers learn to be strong and patient through their trials and hardships. Life continues, despite the gunshots and the roar of the rockets.

Addressing himself to Mazin, Ali said, "Do you think it would be possible for me to obtain a permit from the Lebanese government to film in the South? I want to propose making a piece on the camps for my final film project and..."

Mazin cut him off, "I don't want to dash your hopes, brother Ali, but the situation is very difficult, the matter of permits is complicated."

Ali knit his eyebrows, "Why is that, as long as I apply for the official papers?"

"Look friend, there are many camps. For example, the Ilyas camp in Beirut, and the Ayn el-Hilwa camp in the South and the Burj Barajneh camp on Mount Lebanon and Sabra and Shatilla and others, and these camps are subject to different authorities and groups.

Mazin counted them off on his fingers, "the group Sons of Palestinian Martyrs, the Palestinian Red Crescent, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the People's Front, the Democratic Front and others. On top of that, there are military positions for the Resistance, and between one moment and the next, fire may break out and the bombardment swings into full throttle. And I forgot to say that there are also Antoine Lahad⁸ squadrons in the Lebanese army,

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⁸ A Lebanese general and leader of the South Lebanon Army, b. 1927.

and they are more murderous and dangerous than the Zionist enemy. They are allied with them and...”

Ali cut him off, “Enough already! Forget the final project and thanks be to God!”

Mazin smiled, “Don’t give up, I’ll raise your idea with my commanders and maybe they can help. But I’m not going to promise anything.”

Aziz picked up on Ali’s preoccupied mood. He was a dark-complected young man with a strong build, thick hair and pitch-black eyes.

He said, “Why don’t we hear something on the oud, Ali?”

His glance moved to each of those present, saying, “By the way, Ali is a skillful ode player and his father, may he rest in peace, was Awad Asil.”

Then he looked at his sister, saying, “And this sweet girl plans to be a writer!”

Suhayla’s face flushed. She was not more than eighteen years old, and her wheat-colored face still bore the features of a child.

She said, “You exaggerate, Amm Aziz.”

Ali grabbed the oud, and strummed its strings murmuring, “I want to hear you sing...let’s hear some lines from Mahmoud Darwish’s poem with al-Abdallah’s musical arrangement.”

Hamdan nodded his head, “Great idea!”

Ibrahim exclaimed, “hush!”

Ali tuned his oud strings and in a soft voice he sang,

*“I long for my mother’s bread
and my mother’s coffee*

and my mother's touch

Childhood grows within me

Day after day

I love my life because

If I died

I would be ashamed to make my mother cry."

The group applauded and Ali shook his head smiling, his eyes twinkling. Marwan's glass was full to the brim. He raised it and circled around the seats. Anxious glances followed him.

He said, "Tomorrow is unknown but today is mine."⁹

Mazin tried to stop him but Marwan pushed him away, shouting, "Leave me alone!"

Marwan was in his mid fifties, a broad shouldered, bald man with an ample mustache. He turned to Ali, imploring him, "I want you to perform the poem *The Angry Brow*. Please sing it for me... do you know it?"

Ali nodded his head, "I know it."

Marwan raised his glass crying, "A toast to Ali! A toast!"

Ibrahim grasped Marwan by the shoulder and sat him down. "Calm down, Marwan, calm down."

Ali responded to Marwan's request, and began to play:

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⁹ Lines from the quatrains of the 11th and 12th century Iranian philosopher and poet Omar al-Khayyam. Umm Khulthum performed this poem in song. Al-Khayyam also famously wrote about the pleasures of wine, friends and the present moment.

*“My country
Oh that eagle that plunges its beak
Into my eyes
Into the blaze
Where is the history of the Arabs?
Everything I own is in the presence of death
The angry brow.”*¹⁰

The clinking of glasses stopped, and the group bowed their heads in silence. Ibrahim approached Marwan’s chair shaking his head angrily, “God damn you! Aren’t we all sad enough? You had to request that poem in particular?”

Marwan poured the last drop from the bottle into his cup. He raised his arm up high and the wine streamed down over his bald head.

He screamed, “Wake up people! If you don’t, you will be herded like sheep. As the poet said, “React or die!”

The cup fell from his hand and he dropped to his knees, choking with tears, “Take me to my house! Get my children!”

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¹⁰ This appears to be a version of Mahmoud Darwish’s famous poem *Jabiin wa ghadab*, translated into English and published as “Pride and Fury” by Khouri and Algar. The Arabic text of this poem, and a translation by the editors can be found in *An Anthology of Modern Arabic Poetry*, eds. Mounah A. Khouri and Hamid Algar. Berkeley: University of California Press 1975, 229. Many consider Darwish to be one of the most important modern Arab poets, and the national poet of Palestine. His work evokes the personal and political struggles of Palestinians who faced deterritorialization after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and its subsequent growth and seizure of lands formerly occupied by Palestinians.

Numbness befell the group. Aziz and Mazin hurried to assist him, with Ibrahim following behind. They helped him to his feet and Aziz went ahead of them to open the bedroom door. They heaved him onto the mattress, and he tossed and turned on the bed, fully dressed as he was, muttering, “Treat me with what made me ill in the first place.”¹¹

Ali gathered up the scattered bits of broken glass. Suhayla brought a rag and dried the floor while Hamdan started straightening the place up. Aziz, Mazin and Ibrahim returned to their places.

Aziz noticed your distraction, Maryam, and said, “Hey, where did you go?”

You replied, “I wonder if Marwan needs a doctor?”

Ibrahim replied, “Right now, he’s as high as a kite, he’s forgotten everything.”

Your glance moved between the group and the bedroom door. You said, “But he’s obviously unwell and feeling defeated.”

In a voice full of sorrow, Hamdan said, “My dear, we’re all defeated.”

Ali said, “Weakness is a human tendency, but we have to resist it.”

Aziz added, “You’re right Ali, we all have to play our role.”

Hissing with anger Hamdan yelled, “Who is allowed to play his own role? I, for example, am chief editor of a newspaper, and despite that, I cannot get beyond a sense of defeat. Every day the government sticks its nose into the newspaper’s business, not to mention the fact that it censors us and makes secret reports.”

Aziz interrupted his tirade, “Nothing lasts forever, Hamdan. By the way, what about the position for Maryam?”

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¹¹ A quotation from Abu Nuwas, the 8th and 9th century Arab poet who extolled the pleasures of drinking wine.

Hamdan nodded his head, “There’s currently an editorial position open, and she can start whenever she wants.”

You said, Maryam, “Thanks for your help, Hamdan.”

“You’re welcome, but tell me more about yourself.”

You straightened up in your seat and recited, “Maryam Abdel Fatah, graduate of the College of Arts, Department of Philosophy, 1974, Egyptian citizenship.”

Aziz smiled, “You’re a child!”

You frowned, preferring silence.

He added, “Do you know how old I am?”

You maintained your silence.

“Fifty years old.”

Ibrahim replied, “We are the same age, man!”

Aziz breathed, “Actually it’s fifty-two, so relax!”

You smiled, Maryam, “You don’t look it!”

With a sly laugh Ibrahim said, “And there you are!”

Suhayla asked Hamdan, “If I wanted to publish a story in your paper, what’s the procedure?”

Hamdan took off his glasses. “Submit it to the editorial secretary but don’t touch three topics: politics, religion and sex.”

You laughed hysterically, Maryam.

In surprise, the group turned to look at you.

You cried, “It’s the same triangle!”

Mazin asked, “What triangle?”

You replied, feeling frustrated, “It’s the same taboo subjects: politics, sex and religion. The very same taboos that exist in my own country and that oppressed and stifled me—and now I realize—it’s the same thing here!”

You felt like sharing your frustration, and continued in a choked voice, “Every day since I arrived here I get up early and look for work, and by chance, now I’ve found a job. But now it seems that I’ll have to become a member of the ruling party and if I refuse, I’ll lose my job and have to go back to hunting and searching again. It’s the same stranglehold here and there.”

Aziz approached you and stroked your hair. “Take it easy, Maryam, everything passes.”

You fixed your gaze on Hamdan, asking, “Tell me, Hamdan, do I have to become a member of the Party here?”

Hamdan looked around him and said, “No, I think that the editorial department is removed from such matters.”

You took a deep breath, “Thank God.”

Ibrahim said, “I appreciate your situation, but I don’t see the world as bleak as all that.”

Having emptied his cup Mazin asserted, “To tell the truth, brothers, I only found my freedom when I started fighting in south Lebanon.”

Aziz replied, “But democracy must come first, or violence and chaos will be inevitable.”

Mazin’s face flushed. “This is where we have always differed, Aziz. Remember how we were when we were young? We were fearless when we started to fight.”

Aziz scowled, “You mean that I am a coward!”

Mazin replied hastily, “God forbid, I didn’t mean that at all!”

Tense moments of silence passed until Suhayla broke it, “Amm Mazin, I wish you would tell us about how you came to know Amm Aziz.”

Hamdan smiled, looking thoughtfully at Suhayla. “You want to write a story, right?”

Suhayla shrugged her shoulders without replying.

Mazin looked into Aziz’s angry face saying, “I wish that Aziz would tell it, he’s better at telling stories than me.”

Ibrahim replied, “Yes, tell the story, Aziz!”

Aziz began the tale. “I met Mazin for the first time in the camps after we’d fled with the other refugees to Jordan in 1948. He was a headstrong boy—a stallion you might say—strong and redheaded. We’d vie to see which one of us could climb the tell the fastest. We used to play cops and robbers, always squabbling over which one of us would be the cop and which the robber. We’d toss a coin and Mazin would be angry when it was his turn to play the robber—it always came to blows. Ever since I was little I loved to read, and Mazin loved to hunt with his shotgun. One time, he caught a small falcon and he carried it on his shoulder wherever he went. In the evening—we and the children and people of the camps—used to gather around the fire and we would divide amongst ourselves the morsels of food and the dream of return. Tea circulated along with the sad stories. We would smell the fragrance of the oranges and the breezes off the mountain and when darkness came, the blaze of the fire increased. The Children of the Martyrs Welfare Organization took up the matter of our education. We listened to the lesson written on the chalkboard, repeated it and committed it to memory. When we came of age we participated in smaller Fedayi operations as we were able. After the success of any operation we would dance and sing and share our joy with one another.

One night we were ambushed. We had two comrades with us, one escaped and the other was wounded in his back. We were imprisoned for about year. When we got out we returned to the Fedayi operations again. Our youthful energy was intensified by our zeal, we would cross the

river and the darkness and return carrying our heads high. One night we went to bomb some army barracks. A group of officers and soldiers found us and seized us and we were sentenced to death in front of a firing squad. Some resistance fighters were able to rescue us, but then we faced a tortuous journey through the most rugged parts of the mountains and through the middle of the swamp lands, until we arrived at the Egyptian border at the end of 1954, as I recall it. The Egyptian government welcomed us with open arms and helped us to settle down and complete our education free of charge. It was the first time I saw Gamal Abdel Nasser and I was able to say hello to him.

Mazin smiled, “I remember that we had our photo taken with President Nasser, but I don’t know where that picture went.”

Hamdan said, “May God open a way for you, Amm Aziz.”

Aziz filled his glass and munched on some peanuts. He gulped down his drink and contemplated his friend Mazin as though he had to look at him in order to remember their shared past. Then he went on with his story.

“We completed our education and then volunteered to fight with the Fedayeen in the 1956 war. We were among the first to bless the union between Egypt and Syria in ‘58. The PLO took over responsibility for our care and expenses. We lived in Old Cairo, Shubra, Sayyida Zaynab and Hussayn, and we hung out in the cafés—al-Fishawi and Riche—and we met many Egyptian intellectuals. We joined literary groups such as Galileo and Apollo and took part in activities at the cultural centers. We saw exhibitions, plays and movies and hummed along to the songs of Abdel Halim, Umm Kulthum and Nagat.”

Aziz’s voice changed, becoming sadder. “But this situation did not last, the debacle of ‘67 came along, which made our lives hell and blew away our dreams and ambitions. We left

after Nasser announced his resignation. We ran in the streets like crazy people and participated in the demonstrations of '68. We were arrested and deported from Egypt and then Mazin and I parted ways. He went to South Lebanon and joined the Popular Front, and I went to Tunisia as a member of the PLO. I lived there for years working in the communications department of an agency under the authority of the Organization. My material circumstances improved, but I became weary of office work and I decided to leave, and I ended up among you, here."

Ibrahim said, "You've lived all your life on the edge, Aziz."

Aziz nodded his head. "And I still am, to tell the truth."

Mazin said, "It was our choice from the beginning and we have to keep going."

You addressed yourself to Ali, Maryam: "Have you heard of the Egyptian poet, Salah Jahin?"

He replied quickly, "Who hasn't heard of him? What a great poet and cartoonist!"

"Do you know his quatrains?"

He rubbed the hair on his head, "Some of them."

"Do you know 'It was I who needed to do the impossible'?"

"Of course."

"I wish you would play it."

Ali tuned his oud strings, saying, "I want you to sing with me, Maryam."

Your face went red.

"But..."

Ibrahim encouraged you, "Sing, and we'll join in the chorus."

You nodded your head "OK."

Ali began to play and you, Maryam, sang,

“It was I who needed to do the impossible

I saw the moon

And I jumped up high

Whether I get a better look or not

Doesn’t really bother me

Why should it? As long as my heart is already full of joy

How strange!”

The group repeated,

“It was I who needed to do the impossible

I saw the moon...”

Ibrahim applauded, “Wonderful...wonderful...Jahin is such a great poet!”

After the singing, Ali leaned his oud against the back of a chair. You got up, Maryam, along with Aziz and Suhayla, to go to the kitchen and prepare supper. Ali and Ibrahim cleaned off the table, while Ibrahim picked up the glasses and bottles.

In the kitchen, Suhayla asked you, “Do you want *taman*?”

You raised your eyebrows, not understanding at first.

She pointed to the bag of rice.

You smiled, “Oh, you mean rice!”

Suhayla replied, this time using the Egyptian word, “*Ruz*!”

“Yes, we call it ‘*ruz*’ in Egypt, but anyway, I think we should eat light...what do you think about egg and cheese sandwiches and fried potatoes?”

She nodded her head, “That sounds like a great idea!”

Aziz said, “Are you ladies chatting or preparing the food?”

You both laughed.

He opened the refrigerator and took out some meat slices and put them in the oven.

Suhayla peeled the potatoes and started to fry them as you warmed the bread and prepared the salad, Maryam.

The three of you emerged from the kitchen carrying trays of sandwiches, broiled meat and salads, and the group devoured the food quickly. After the meal, Aziz cried out in a languid tone, “By the way, there isn’t a young man around who can make better tea than Abu Khalil.”¹²

Ibrahim got up enthusiastically and soon the cups circulated along with the conversation and the smoke.

Mazin looked at his watch, stood up suddenly and passed by those seated as he headed for the door of the apartment. He turned the knob, saying, “Goodbye everyone, I’m due in Lebanon tomorrow!”

Aziz walked toward him. They embraced and exchanged some whispered words.

Hamdan caught up with Mazin, “Drop me off on your way, I have work in the morning.”

Standing in the threshold of the open door Aziz said, “Keep in touch...OK?”

With a speed matching that of his footsteps on the stairs, Mazin yelled, without turning around, “God willing...Goodbye!”

Aziz shut the door and before he had a chance to sit down, he heard a confused voice coming from the bedroom.

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¹² Aziz calls his friend by his *kunya*, that is he is referred to in relation to his son Khalil: ‘Abu Khalil’ or father of Khalil.

He stood up listening, and after a minute he said, "I think Marwan is awake."

Ibrahim replied, "Great, let's go get him up and have him drive us home."

Aziz entered the bedroom with Ibrahim right behind him. They grapped Marwan by the arm, and succeeded in getting him up off the bed.

Staggering as he walked, Marwan mumbled, "Where am I?"

Ibrahim pushed him into the bathroom, and put his head under the tap.

Aziz brought a towel and dried his head.

You, Maryam, prepared a cup of coffee and brought it for him. Marwan gulped some down and said, "I'm sorry, everyone, I've been a pest."

Ibrahim replied, "Forget it...the important thing is, are you OK now?"

He nodded his head, "I'm fine."

He took the last sip of his coffee, stood up and looked around, "My keys."

Everyone searched with him, on the chairs and under them, until Ali found them behind a large chair.

Aziz helped him to straighten up his clothes. "Thank God... you were in a bad state, but you look a lot better!"

Ali put his oud into its fabric case and Suhayla went into the bathroom and came out with her bag on her shoulder. "I'm ready!"

And you, Maryam, echoed, "I'm ready."

Aziz turned toward you, gently pulled your jacket closed across your chest and whispered, "Stay in touch!"

You followed the others down, while Aziz stood at the top of the stairs, waving farewell. You all piled into Marwan's car, which took off, disappearing quickly into the fog.

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The lights were dim; one could not distinguish the occupants from their wraps.

You walked down a long passageway, Maryam, and entered a narrow room with a low ceiling. The room had no windows, only small slits high up on the walls that allowed the entry of a few rays of light and a little stale air.

The person seated closest to the door stood up to do the introductions. She pointed to those present saying, "Naziha...Gazwan."

And then she gestured to herself, adding lethargically, "Suhad."

After all the greetings were exchanged, Maryam, you sat down in front of your desk. It was piled high with papers to be edited.

After straightening up some papers, Ghazwan said, "We would like to order some tea for you, sister Maryam."

You shook your head, "Thank you, but your warm welcome is enough for me."

Suhad got up, walked around her desk and came toward you. She was short, stout and had green eyes. Her chestnut hair was pulled back in a braid.

She said enthusiastically, "Today you are our guest. So, would you like tea or coffee?"

You smiled, Maryam. "*Koshary* tea, with the sugar on the side."

She stroked her hair, "What is *koshary*?"

Ghazwan replied, "Koshary, that's an Egyptian food, right?"

Suhad raised her eyebrows; "There is no food in the department, only tea and coffee. Be patient, my sister and after work we'll make you food, and..."

You cut her off, “Koshary tea is made by pouring boiling water on loose tea leaves and adding sugar, you see?”

The group laughed heartily, except for Naziha, who stood up suddenly, rapping her knuckles on the desk. “We’d better finish our work, we’ve still got a lot to do.”

Naziha was extraordinarily slender, with narrow black eyes and short hair. Confronted with her stern features, the group fell silent.

You looked at the papers piled up on your desk, Maryam, and asked yourself, ‘How am I going to get through all this editing in this dim, stifling room?’

The situation didn’t look good.

The first days of work passed in a sort of cautious calm, except for Suhad’s cajoling you every morning, “Please, Miss Maryam, say ‘Good morning’—Egyptian-style!”

You would reply with the greeting in the Egyptian pronunciation.

Suhad would lean back in her chair, “You Egyptians have such a lovely way of saying things!”

Suhad was, to a large extent, a spontaneous type, and the opposite of Naziha, who wore a distinctly wary look in her hawk-like eyes. As for Ghazwan, he was, as they say, a mild tempered sort, always trying to keep the peace.

Suhad put a cup of tea on your desk, Maryam, and then went to get a chair to sit down next to you, giving her back to Naziha.

She asked you in a low voice, “How are you all in Egypt? And how is Adel Imam? I really miss seeing his new work. I have most of his films and plays on video and recently my family and I saw the play *The Witness Who Didn’t See Anything*. It was great, you know, I saw it three times!”

Ghazwan said, “That play had political references to the Sadat era.”

Naziha shot you an uncomfortable glance, Maryam. It seemed that she had been eavesdropping on the conversation. She said, “Should we call you a Sadatist, or...”

You gave a bitter laugh, replying, “There’s no call for that.”

Your face flushed Maryam, and tension gripped your chest, as you added, “I don’t accept anyone describing me as a Sadatist—I am Maryam, remember the name well—I am just here for work, no more and no less. I hope I have made myself clear.”

You grabbed a piece of paper from the pile on your desk and took your pen adding, “It’s enough that we pay the price for the mistakes and stupidity of others.”

The atmosphere was electric. Suhad returned to her desk, hiding her head in her papers. Ghazwan busied himself organizing the folders in front of him.

Naziha pursed her lips and stood up suddenly, crying, “You mean that I’m stupid, don’t you? Really...you Egyptians!”

You threw down your pen, Maryam, with a sharpness that was unlike you, and cut her off, “Don’t say something you might regret!”

Naziha recoiled in her chair.

Ghazwan said, “She doesn’t mean to insult you, Maryam.”

You returned to your papers, muttering, “Or maybe she does.” Naziha gathered her papers and her bag and hurried toward the door crying, “This can’t continue...we simply can’t go on like this.”

The atmosphere was thick with tension as everyone went back to work in silence.

.....

The days began to run together, each the same—with you sitting at the same desk, under the same low ceiling and the same dim light—in a circle of alienation and weariness.

One day you looked at Naziha's empty seat, and remarked, "I wonder why Naziha is absent, it's not like her."

Ghazwan replied, "Keep your mind on your work, Maryam, Naziha doesn't need to work like the rest of us."

Suhad pursed her lips, "She never visits anyone nor does she want anyone to visit her."

You shrugged your shoulders, "She's free to do what she wants...I suppose we should get back to work."

Ghazwan took a handkerchief from his pocket, dried the sweat from his brow, and glanced between you and Suhad, saying in a low voice, "Naziha is granted special exceptions as to when she comes and goes, and she has free reign to search files and so on, in return for..."

He looked toward the door, and then turned his head to examine the entire extent of the narrow room.

You waited for him to finish what he was saying but he remained silent.

You said, "You mean she is a 'sparrow'?"

He said nothing.

Suhad raised her eyebrows, "What sparrow? What do you mean, Maryam?"

You shook your head. "I mean that she watches what goes on in the office and writes reports about everyone."

Suhad put a finger over her mouth. "Be quiet, the walls have ears."

Silence reigned.

You slipped out into the fresh air, Maryam.

After work you hurried to the bus stop, climbed into a seat, and leaned your face against the window. You were struck by the streets and alleys as they went by, lined as they were with houses, shops and trees, and peopled by a multitude of brown faces. You heard the children's shouts and the calls of the vendors pushing hand carts packed with everything from old clothes and appliances to toys and handmade items. You could hear the quarrels of women as they bargained over prices, along with the hurried steps of men shouldering their way through the crowd. You could see narrow shops, minarets, cafés and alleys, and above, the beautiful lattice-work windows and balconies. These sights and the aromas of bread, incense and water pipes made you feel as though you were in one of the popular districts in old Cairo. You felt suspended in time, swinging between a feeling of alienation from your country, and a sense of alienation from your very soul, Maryam.

A song came to mind and you murmured, "*Oh you, going to Ghouria...bring a gift for my beloved...*"¹³

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¹³ Al-Ghouria is a market area in the old or 'Islamic' part of Cairo.



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Cairo

You used to walk side by side, fingers interlocked, with firm steps and hearts that opened onto a beautiful world.

That was the way it was between you and Saeed, your first love, Maryam. You walked together in al-Ghouria, looking at all the handworked goods, from embroidered gallabeyas and scarves embellished with beads and little balls, to carpets and skullcaps and shawls and ornaments.

You breathed in the fragrance of history that emanated from the elegant wooden windows, Zuwayla gate, al-Ghuri palace and the wall of old Cairo. You savoured the incense and small shops, the ancient mosques and cafés, and the smoke of the water pipes. Emerging from al-Ghouria into the street of the goldsmiths in Khan al-Khalili, you dreamt of two wedding bands, some bangles and a little nest of a home. Then you strolled through the Hussayn area as the Sufis performed their rituals of remembrance and you walked the long alley to the Masafir Khana whose walls have quietly embraced works of art and design throughout history.¹⁴ You climbed the winding steps to a shop famous for hot spicy beans and fried bean patties and devoured your food with pleasure. Then after roaming around for a while, you wound up at Fishawy's coffee shop to sip tea at your leisure.

Your eyes met, gleaming with the idea of going to Grandmother's house. The old lady greeted you, her calm smile revealing her prominent silver teeth. She always asked if you were hungry, and then set a generous meal on the table before you. You never, ever confessed that you had already eaten from the restaurants and cafés on the street.

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¹⁴ A famous art gallery in the Hussayn area.

Grandmother left the two of you alone on the pretext of preparing plates of rice with strained yogurt and vowing that you would lick your fingers of its deliciousness. From time to time she poked her head out to make sure that you were each sitting in a seat some distance from the other, you could always sense her shadow lurking nearby.

Once you forgot about Grandmother, and your hands met in longing, your eyes in desire. Saeed whispered, “I love you.”

Embarrassed, you flushed and replied in a whisper, “Stay by me, don’t ever leave me.”

He stroked your hair with his gentle palm. “I’m with you, don’t be afraid, I promise.” He raised his right hand in an oath, “I vow in the name of Almighty God, that I am yours, Maryam, and I will not leave you until the day I die and...”

You laughed, “OK, OK...I believe you!”

Noticing a slight movement behind the door, you moved apart, and Grandmother’s shadow slid between you.

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You stretched your body out on the sofa in the heart of the room, Maryam, and shut your eyes, trying to rest, but it was no use. A rapping sound invaded your head. You opened your eyes—the rapping was coming from the direction of the ceiling. You steeled yourself as the noise intensified.

You turned over, what was the use? You got up and called out from the window overlooking the back stairway, but no one answered. You listened carefully and said to yourself, ‘This is the sound of the meat pounder. It must be Zuba, there’s no one but her and her sister

Azhar left in this ramshackle old building.’ You called another time, but they never heard you, and if they had, they would have just screamed as usual, and then demanded to know, “Why shouldn’t they pound the meat? Don’t you want them to eat? And why would someone like you stay alone in the house anyway? They are free to do what they want on their own property and so on...”

And if someone wanted to get involved and negotiate with them, all he would get is abuse, some nonsensical muttering, and maybe even an accusation.

Zuba, Azhar and Murtada were the children of the deceased landlord. His wife had followed him in death, leaving her oldest daughter Zuba at fifteen, and her other daughter Azhar at nine, and Murtada at only three years old. It was said that the landlord had been an introverted, weak personality in the face of his wife, who had a sharp tongue and who quarreled with any of God’s creatures whether there was a reason or not.

The oldest daughter had inherited these characteristics from her mother, along with her appearance, for she was thin, her skin was a dark, almost rusty color and she had protruding teeth and curly hair. Murtada resembled his father more, shy and overcome by his older sister’s dominance. As for Azhar, she was excessively fat, and her features almost drowned in the flesh of her bloated face. Her older sister’s tight control over her very breaths had reduced her to the likeness of a terrified mouse.

The people of the quarter made fun of those girls, giving them sarcastic nicknames. They called Zuba “the Scowler” and they called Azhar “the Fat Failure”. As for Murtada, they called him “Girlie”. The Scowler, and her sister the Fat Failure undertook to raise Girlie in the lifestyle of their father. It was their good luck that the boy was clever at his studies, so that—directly after

his graduation—he traveled to the oil countries, and during his long absence he was content to send home regular sums of money every month and for each holiday.

The Scowler was divorced twice because she was barren, so she ended up having liaisons with the customers of the local café. They would slip away from the café, reaching her via the roof terraces, or in the café cellar, or on the outskirts of town. As for the “Fat Failure”, she was excessively curious, and would stick her nose into things that did not concern her—which was basically innocuous—but which exposed her to the ridicule and abuse of the men and women of the quarter.

Once you were at your Grandmother’s for dinner, when suddenly Grandmother stopped eating, stood up and made her way slowly to the door of the apartment. Quick as lightning she flung open the door, hurling the Failure back, and slamming her head forcefully against the opposite wall. You got up quickly to rescue her from Grandmother’s grasp, and just barely enabled the girl to escape. She hastened out the door like a terrified rabbit, with Grandmother’s screams pursuing her, “You wretched girl! You’re not going quit this nasty habit of yours? By God...if I catch you eavesdropping again it will be a bad day for you...you fat thing, you disgrace to girls!”

You closed the back window, Maryam, after despairing of stopping the racket of the meat pounder. You looked into the mirror that was vibrating on the wall in the passage between the kitchen and the bathroom. Dark circles surrounded your eyes, and white strands were invading your hairline. You grabbed a comb and began combing your hair, but after a moment you stopped, staring into the glass. You flung down the comb, mumbling, “Why should I even bother?”

The rapping continued.

You lifted your face to the ceiling asking yourself, “Perhaps your fate has become like theirs? Ahhh...Maryam, who can turn the rusty wheels of your life? Who would be willing to take the risk?”

*Part Three: Longing**Cairo*

A small room in the heart of a tunnel. In the middle of the room stands Grandmother's brass bed. The pale coverlet blends with the yellow color of the curtains and the walls.

The tunnel is extremely dark. You stand on tiptoes, Maryam, trying to push up a rolling metal door, and you strain to breathe as you finally manage to lift it.

The lights are dim, your old street becomes misty, and the features of the people are not discernable. You spit into your hands and stumble through the tunnel¹. In the yellow room you find legs of meat hanging from the ceiling and a huge hand chopping them up with a cleaver. Blood gushes out and you let out a stifled scream.

You run feverishly. Your father stands at the end of the tunnel wearing his old wool dressing gown, and he has a dirty grey towel stretched between his arms. Suddenly a bed appears and you find yourself sitting on its edge, wearing a short nightshirt—your long legs naked.

Your father screams, "If a person doesn't want to wash the towel, he will have to walk away from it dirty!"²

You move toward your father, extending your hand to greet him, but he disappears. You call to him but there is no answer.

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¹ A motion sometimes believed to ward off evil or bad luck.

² A proverb meaning that when one does not take care of unpleasant tasks, one has to face the consequences later.

You open your eyes suddenly, Maryam. You find yourself having sunk into your seat. You think that perhaps you had dozed off for a bit. Ahhh, Maryam, your father's spirit haunts you sometimes. The arm of death took him while his son, your brother, was abroad. Your brother did not even make it back for the burial, and even then, his biggest concern was the house, because he was the only son among two daughters. Your sister barely waited until the mourning period was over to return to her husband, far away in one of the oil countries.

And here you are...the walls close around you in grandmother's house, while the longing for a warm embrace overcomes you. You inhaled deeply and stood up, searching the cupboards and the dressing table drawers for some ties with which to braid your hair. Your hand came upon an open envelope full of old pictures. Grandmother used to filch a few everytime she went visiting.

Oh...the wonderful stories go right to your dispirited heart and renew its spark. You brushed the dust off the first picture and smiled...here is Umm Safeer, the Copt, with her large, beautiful eyes and her dimples. On her right is Umm Saeed, with her fine, soft hair and round eyes, sitting in a dignified manner. Surrounding all those women are their husbands and children. And there you are, squeezed into the picture between Saeed and Meena—your head and your shining eyes the only visible part of you. In the background of the picture is the dam of al-Qanatir al-Khayriyya.

The people of the old neighborhood used to gather in the morning of Sham el-Nissim³ to relax in the gardens; singing, joking, playing, dancing—and dancing with them were the

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³ A traditional springtime holiday during which families gather for a meal or have picnics to celebrate the coming of spring.

waters of the Nile, joyful at the gatherings at its bank that have continued for thousands of years.

When stomachs began to grumble, they would spread out old newspapers or sheets on the grass, and arrange colored eggs amongst dishes of salad, salted fish, chickpeas and lemons. The picnic always concluded with cups of tea around the primus stove.

You and Saeed would quietly slip away from the gathering to spend a few short moments together, away from watchful eyes.

In the evening, you counted your few piasters standing in front of the cinema, looking at the poster—it was for an actor whose quirky behavior you both loved. Charlie, or Uncle Charlie, as you liked to call him. You chose two seats in the back corner of the theater and as soon as the lights were dim, Saeed's hand found its way to your body, Maryam. You slumped down in your seat, sighing softly. But once you noticed heads turning around to look for the source of this sound, you both sat up straight in your seats and returned your attention to the film.

In the beginning was a cartoon, you laughed at the schemes of the little mouse, Jerry, who resorted to tricks to escape from Tom, the cat, but Tom would never learn and made the same mistakes every time.

After the cartoon, "Uncle Charlie" would take over the screen, with his laughing eyes and his bowler hat; his little mustache and raised eyebrows, and the cane that he twirled around as he walked.

In this film, Charlie played a factory worker who fell victim to the 'teeth' of enormous machines, like a terrified rabbit in the jaws of a predator. He worked mechanically at his job until he collapsed from exhaustion and overuse—just like a rusty bolt. The foreman

kicked him out of the factory, his hat and cane fell into the street, and he was carted off. The audience laughed at Uncle Charlie's funny movements, and at the strange little noises that he made. You and Saeed convulsed with laughter and tears ran down your face.

You put the picture aside, Maryam, whispering, "Ahhh, Uncle Charlie, you became a cog in a machine that wouldn't stop...if only you could have predicted what's happening now. Have we all become gears in tyrannical machines that have no mercy? Tell me, please, Uncle Charlie, will the wheels never stop turning?"

You gazed at the picture again—its edges were curled and worn. There is your father wearing his tarboosh and crisp, clean clothes. He is standing with a group of men—some of whom you remembered and some of whom you didn't. Which of those men had died? Which had left the country, like his Coptic friend Al-Kasan? Al-Kasan, a painter who had married a foreigner, was standing behind your father. He used to visit your house from time to time, and on one occasion he gave your father a painting that depicted a thick stand of trees along a river.

You and your father once visited his home, which was packed with canvases and paints. Even his bedroom seemed to serve as a studio for his colorful work. His wife was a blonde, blue-eyed woman who used to give you chocolates and magazines with pictures. She also had her own room with a large silver cross hanging on the wall over her bed.

And who is that standing alert like a soldier to right of your father? You touched your hand your forehead—it was Abu Awad, your father's cousin from a distant village in Upper Egypt. The elder of his small community, he always sported a distinctive twisted mustache. You had only seen him a few times, and that was in that far off place. He marked the birth of his son, Awad—after producing four daughters—with celebrations and lovely evening

parties. Before Awad had even reached his twentieth birthday, his father married him to his paternal cousin Mahasin.

As a small child, you had attended this wedding party, Maryam. When Abu Awad died, his son did not replace him as village sheikh, but instead emigrated with his wife to one of the oil countries.

As the fates would have it in your little world, Maryam, you were their temporary guest during your exile in Iraq. But Awad had become a stranger to you. He was no longer the nice village boy you had known, and even Mahasin, his wife and cousin, seemed different.

The last time you encountered them was after your return from a meeting with Aziz. As soon as you entered, Awad turned his back to you—he was wearing striped pajamas—and his wife ran toward you, wrapping a robe around her body, her gold jewelry jingling.

She cried, “What’s kept you out so late, Maryam?”

Awad turned around and approached you as sparks flew from his eyes. “No girl living under this roof can stay out until such an hour.”

He pursed his lips adding, “Haven’t we told you? Instead of wandering the streets, you should attend to this matter of Mr. Abdel Hafiz. What’s wrong with him? Why aren’t you paying him any attention? He is a very important man in the ruling party, and he will take you far, very far.”

His wife winked, “And, he has his eye on her, she only has to give him a sign...”

You flung your bag on the nearest chair and cried angrily, “Go on...why did you stop speaking? He is married and has children, and he is as old as my dad!”

Mahasin did not help the situation by replying, “There’s nothing shameful about marrying an older man.”

Awad continued, “Also, he has a lot of influence in this country.”

Awad’s words provoked you, you approached him scowling, and he stepped backwards. Grey was spreading through his hair even though he was only in his early forties. You screamed at him, “And sir, of course you have an interest in my getting close to him so that you might become the one who carries his bag and writes reports for him and sits up late at night, and makes matters easy for him... and who knows what else!”

He fell with all his weight into the chair; eyebrows raised, and sputtered, “Who told you this?”

You sat down, crossing one leg over the other. “This is a small country, there are no secrets.”

He looked at you, still wide-eyed, “Tell me, who told you this?”

You shrugged your shoulders, Maryam. “You don’t need to know that.”

Mahasin rushed to stand behind her husband’s chair, yelling, “You should be ashamed of yourself, Maryam!”

You breathed out angrily, “And it’s not shameful that you don’t care about me?”

Mahasin hurried over to close a door. “Lower your voice, the children are still awake!”

In a calmer tone, Awad said, “Maryam, my girl, we only want what is best for you.”

His wife walked toward the kitchen muttering “I take refuge in God from the accursed Satan...I am going to make lemonade to clear your minds.”

You caught up with her, “There is no need for that, I’m exhausted... I’m going to bed.”

You walked toward the bedroom and before you closed the door between you, you said, “Please wake me early, with the children.”

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Cairo

You came across another photograph, Maryam, and you exclaimed, “Who is that beautiful laughing woman?” She was wearing her hat the way foreigners do—her figure as perfect as that of a manikin in a shop window—while she rested her arms on the terrace wall. In the background one could make out the minarets of ‘Cairo the Protected.’⁴

You drew the picture closer to your eyes. Ahh...it was your mother when she was still young and beautiful and was, as your father liked to describe her, just like a princess. But why did her lovely figure become so bloated and flaccid in her older years? You remembered the last time that you dreamed of her; it had been a few days after Grandmother’s death.

She had approached you with her rhythmic stride, wearing a diaphanous white gown. She had a marvelous smile on her lips, and her eyes were gleaming. She passed through the glass of the closed window, surrounded by sheer, heavenly rays.

You turned over on the bed, rubbed your eyes and abandoned your pillow, but no sooner had you stood up than she left the room. You searched all around the house and found her sitting, her back against the kitchen door, holding two small doves in her lap.

You exclaimed, “What beautiful doves, mother!”

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⁴ An epithet of Cairo.

Your mother stroked the little birds and sang, “*Oh dove of the land, fly, stand up and flap your wings.*”

You lifted the cover from your body, Maryam, singing softly, “*Stand on the shoulder of the free man and reap the harvest.*”⁵

You looked around, it was pitch dark and your mother was gone.

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You lit the lamp and a sound from outside reached you. It was, as you expected, a voice ringing out from the café.

“Oh daughter of the Sultan

Take care of the poor

The water is in your hands,

and Adawiyya is thirsty.

Give me some water, give me...a kiss

The water in your hands is...”⁶

The smoke rose over the customers’ applause and the clatter of cups. The radio continued to blare, “*On Abbas Bridge, the people are walking, walking...*”

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⁵ Lines from a patriotic Egyptian song.

⁶ The line finishes, “like sugar”. This and the following line is the rest of the Umm Khulthum song, written by Ahmed Adawiyya.



A Cairo Cafe

You closed the window, and turned around muttering, “I miss you so much, mother...but what does the dove in the dream mean? And why were you cradling it so carefully in your hands?”

May God have mercy on your soul, mother, and upon that of father, who kept you under his thumb, even throughout his illness. You took care of him and vowed that you would serve him even if he turned into bare bones. You would lift your face to heaven asking, “Lord, let my day come before his!”

Your mother was fashionable in her youth. She used to anoint her body with strong perfume and wear dresses embroidered with delicate winding patterns on the bodice. During those days, this style was called “Décolleté Shadia”. She used to love Shadia’s songs, and she sang them wherever she went. She never missed a single one of Shadia’s films playing at the

cinema and memorized all her songs by heart. As she sang, her hips and shoulders swayed and her long hair followed suit,

“Oh...engagement ring

May we all have good fortune

And build brick by brick

Our nest of love.”

You were very taken, Maryam, at how your mother’s body moved in her silver high heels. In the wee hours of the night you crept into her room as she slept in order to steal those magical shoes from under the bed. You dusted them off and struggled to put them on so as to descend the stairs, swaying with the sound of the heels clapping on the marble. Your hips danced with joy until you fell, rolled down the stairs and twisted your ankle. In the end you got a burning thrashing.

Despite your mother’s love for your father, and her good feelings toward him, a tempest would blow up between them from time to time, especially when your paternal aunt came to visit from her distant home.

Your paternal grandfather had been a trader from Upper Egypt, and he roamed far and wide selling his goods. One day, as he was trying to make his daily bread, he travelled into the land of the Turks. When World War I began he was unable to return home. But the idea of settling down there began to appeal to him and he married a Turkish woman who bore him three girls, one of whom was Aunt Ghalia. The girls grew up and the grandfather died—a stranger in a foreign land.

Aunt Ghalia rarely visited Egypt. She was a pale woman with golden hair that reached to her hips. She spoke very little, but she enjoyed her few visits tremendously and loved the warmth of Egyptian family life. She liked to visit the mosques and the saint's shrines and she would never fail to pray for the reunification of the family in the al-Hussayn mosque, and to visit the local tombs. She would wander in the old areas and buy precious and beautiful things from there as mementos of the beloved land. Then she would return to her country a bit heavier, since she could not resist the *mulukhiyya* and the stuffed vegetables—especially the grape leaves—and the little pots of okra and sheep's trotters and so on.

Your father used to take pride in his Turkish relatives and when he was feeling particularly proud and found something amiss, a conflict would rise up between him and your mother. Then the issue would grow from a family quarrel to a major conflict.

Your mother would put her hands on her hips screaming, "In the name of God, Abdallah, don't you be thinking that these outsiders are better than us, they are from the stock of tobacco and soap merchants, and they got rich at our expense!"

Your father's eyes would bulge, "Have some shame, Waliya, instead of saying that you should be saying how thankful we are."

"We are the ones who are generous, my dear, our country is full of riches!"

In the evening, your mother would distribute flat cakes stuffed with pistachios and almonds, and Turkish delight that Aunt Ghalia had brought with her on her visit. She beamed with pride at her neighbors, as both young and old circled around the magnificent scent and all ate with pleasure and delight.



You put the picture aside, Maryam, and a smile crept across your lips as you picked up another. The photo was badly ripped, so you tried to smooth down the torn pieces to identify some indistinct black shapes.

You leaned your back against the wall, and brought the picture close to your eyes. It was your mother and your aunt and surrounding them were other women—all wearing black. You had three aunts, but there was no sign of the youngest aunt, whom you resembled.

You were still a young child but the vision of the fire that caught the hem of her gown had never left you.

She had torn screaming through the narrow passage between the stove and the bathroom as the fire ran from the hem to the top of her nightgown with horrible speed. There was no one else but you in the house, Maryam, the others had gone out to offer condolences to one of the neighbors. You were curled up in fear—crying and screaming—and even now, Maryam, you don't know why the fire had just flamed up like that.

Theories began to fly: some said it was an accident, while others attributed it to the emigration of her beloved, and regretted that she had fallen into a state of despair. You could not understand how fire could devour such a lovely person. You knew only one thing: that your aunt would never return and that black had become the dominant color of the household.

Baghdad

Your mind drifted to another scene in which the color black was predominant. One day you were walking down a street in the city of your exile, and you began to see groups of people wearing black. They were scattered here and there, on the doorsteps of the houses, on the sidewalks, on the rooftops, in the gardens, mosques, courtyards, squares, and even in the narrow alleys.

Women were slapping their faces in despair and wailing and tearing their gowns and beating their heads with their sandals, and men were rubbing their faces with dirt and hitting their heads with their sandals or clogs until blood began to flow. The place had a strange, mythic atmosphere of self-punishment.

You hastened your steps, skirting the masses of black. You kept running until you found yourself in front of the koshari restaurant in which you had eaten the first time with Aziz. Suddenly you wanted to take refuge within its familiar confines. You asked for Ahmed the Egyptian, the waiter who had greeted you so warmly that day with Aziz, and who showed you the picture of his fiancé.

His colleague said that he had joined the army and had been transferred to the Iranian front.

You thought about the woman who was waiting for him in Egypt, remembering her beautiful dark face with the friendly features of a country girl. You asked yourself, 'I wonder what his family or relatives thought about this? Did he choose to go or was he forced?'

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The face of an old man staring into his cold plate appeared to you. The sun was setting and your spirit was sinking under the weight of exile and the sight of the depressing homes around you. In the back of each house was a trail of wet sand leading to the sewer drain. Children were playing and squabbling in the alleys. Women, most of them wearing black, walked slowly in groups. Men in white gallabeyas and beards were heading toward the only mosque in the neighborhood.

You arrived at Suhayla's house. It was a single story red brick house, with wooden windows and a rusty iron door. You knocked twice for its owner, and Suhayla quickly answered, smiling warmly.

She led the way inside, Maryam, and you entered a hall that was carpeted with a woven reed mat. In the center of the mat was a low, round wooden table on top of which sat a brass teapot and some small cups. Sitting in front of it was a thin old man, silently examining the plate in front of him.

You said, "Hello!"

You repeated the greeting, but there was no answer. He continued to stare silently into his plate.

Suhayla said, "He won't hear you."

You walked behind her. She was wearing a long gallabeyya, embroidered in the Arab style. The two of you walked slowly into an adjacent room, and sat down on a woven rug in the middle of the room.

She patted you on the shoulder, "Welcome my dear...you have brought light to the house."

Smiling, you murmured the traditional response to her welcome, “The house is brightened by its inhabitants.”

You glanced around the room. It was wide, with a high ceiling, and was furnished with two sofas also covered with Arab-style woven rugs. Between the sofas was a low brass table on top of which was a cassette player, surrounded by cassettes, papers and an ashtray full of cigarette butts. An oud leaned against the wall in the corner of the room.

An ancient wooden bureau with a mirror in an Arabesque frame sat on one side of a small table, which was set with a kettle, a brass coffee pot and small delicate cups. On the other side of the table was a small stove. Cardboard boxes piled high with old newspapers, books and magazines were scattered all over the room.

Suhayla said, “I bet you’d like some tea!”

She stood up, lit the stove and put the small kettle over the fire. When the water boiled, she took the kettle off the fire, poured in dry tea and placed the top firmly back on. She arranged the kettle and some cups on a tray, carried it over, and put it down on the floor between you, Maryam. She turned on the tape player and Fayruz’s voice burst forth:

Sad northern nights

Remember me always

Remember me

•••••

You sipped your tea, enjoying the fellowship and the song, and asked her about her news.

Grasping her little cup in both hands she said, “Thank God...my studies are going fine, and I write now and then but...” She took a sip of tea and looked away bashfully. Then she said, “There’s something personal that is troubling me, and I just can’t relax...”

You replied sorrowfully, “Who can relax these days?”

She put down her cup. “You know my grandfather...you saw him when you came in?”

You nodded your head. “Yes, I saw him.”

“He’s been like that, unable to speak or hear since my father disappeared. Father was in his twenties then, a handsome, affectionate man. I was a child when soldiers stormed the house one day. They beat him and tortured him. My grandfather searched for him everywhere; the police departments, the jails, the prosecutor’s office, the vital statistics register, the passport office, the hospitals, and so on. Days passed and the years went by and no one ever found out what happened to him or where he went, if he is alive or dead. Can you imagine, Maryam? I have begun to fear my own dreams.”

A sad silence reigned between you, and Fayruz continued to sing,

Sad northern nights

Remember me always...remember me

.....

You said to Ahmed the Egyptian's colleague, "I wish you'd tell me Ahmed is OK."

He replied, "God willing," and went back to his customers.

You left the koshari shop behind, Maryam, crossing the street only to find more blackness awaiting you. You asked one of the passers-by on the street about it. He raised his eyebrows, surprised, "How can you not know? Today is the commemoration of the battle of Karbala."

The image of a handsome young man passed before your eyes, Ali ibn Abi Talib, who vouched for the safety of the Prophet of God—God bless him and grant him salvation—and slept in his bed, warding off the disbelievers. That young man became such a romantic figure, a knight, courageous in the pursuit of justice.

Like the fate of other idealistic people, he fell into the trap that they had so skillfully set for him, and the succession was usurped from him. The factions changed, they split and multiplied until even his sons Hassan and Hussein met a tragic end. Seeds of dissent uprooted the ideals of the Muslims and prevented them from remaining united as one community.⁷

In sorrow and with a vision of blood before your eyes, you mumbled to yourself, Maryam, "What good are feelings of guilt, and what is the use of such sadness about the fate of that noble knight, Ali? What's the point of these rituals that punish both body and soul?"

You completed your walk with difficulty amidst the throngs and the wails, and the question assaulted your mind, 'Are we living a second Karbala?'⁸

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⁷ Ali was the fourth Caliph of the young Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died. Not all Muslims believed that he was a rightful leader however. Ali's followers became known as the "party of Ali," or the Shi'a. After Ali was killed by his enemies, the Shi'a movement grew.

⁸ Here the author refers to the fact that Hussein, the son of Ali, was killed at the battle of Karbala by Muslims who came to be known as Sunnis. In the Iran-Iraq war, Sunni and Shi'a

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You were dying for a cup of tea, so you put some water into the kettle. As you stared into the eye of the dancing flame, another scene emerged from your memory.

•••••

From a distance, the figure of Suhayla came into view. You were walking across a garden that had a fountain at its center, its spouts of water illuminated with colorful lights. Exiting the garden, you arrived at the door of the theater where she stood.

You greeted her and—noting the evident distress on her face—asked, “You’ve been waiting here long?”

She looked at her watch, “Amm Aziz and Ali are late.”

You patted her on the shoulder, “We’d better go in.”

You interlocked your arm with hers and walked into the lobby. The place was air-conditioned, with colored lights, pictures of actors and comfortable seats everywhere. You sat down and sipped tea together, and before you had finished your cigarette, Maryam, Ali entered the hall hurriedly, carrying an oud under his arm. Aziz followed carrying an envelope

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Muslims also fought each other, although that war was also motivated by Saddam Hussein’s territorial and political aspirations. It was not purely a sectarian war.

in his hand. Suhayla called to her brother and he wheeled around. As soon as he saw her he rushed over to her.

She said, "Quickly for goodness sake, the band is waiting for you."

Ali exchanged a few quick words with Aziz, embraced him and then disappeared into the auditorium. Suhayla caught up with him, saying, "'I'll beat you inside, I'd like to watch Ali from the front."

Aziz whipped around snapping, "I need some air!"

In seconds he was back outside the theater. Surprised by his abruptness, you caught up with him, Maryam. After the two of you crossed the street to the opposite sidewalk, you grasped his arm to stop him.

"What's wrong? Tell me!"

He kept walking. Together you crossed another square, leaving behind the hubbub of the crowds. You arrived at a residential street by the river, where sleepy houses and the flowing water calmly accompanied you. Aziz sat on a wooden bench under a eucalyptus tree, gloomily gazing at the movement of the water. You sat down next to him in silence. He took a deep breath, looked around, and drew near until he was almost touching you.

He said, "I have heard from reliable sources that the Palestinian Democratic Party might be dissolved."

Alarmed, you cried, "That's terrible, what are you going to do?"

He looked around him and found nothing but the veil of night and silence. "I received orders to give up the apartment and go."

You stared with surprise into his hazel eyes. "But..."

"Mazin was right."

“You mean...”

“South Lebanon”

“You’re determined to go?”

“There’s nothing else I can do.”

You got up from your place, and approached the wall by the river. Aziz stood up, following you, and rested his arm on your shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t be afraid.”

You took a deep breath, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was difficult in these circumstances.” He raised his palm to your face. Do you want to come with us?”

“With you?”

“With a group of my associates and I. Perhaps you can catch up with us, we can make the arrangements.”

“Really?”

He smiled, “But you should know, there are Kalashnikovs out there.”

“When will you leave?”

“Any time now.”

You looked to the river, silently, Maryam. Salty tears began to gather in the corner of your eye. A light breeze caressed your hair.

You said, “But you were just going to the theater, as if everything was normal!”

“I have to behave as though everything is normal, and besides, I needed to see you.”

The two of you walked alongside the river. Then Aziz stopped suddenly and looked at his watch. “I have to go.”

“Just like that?”

“There’s no time...so...what do you want to do?”

Your voice choked, “If I have to leave, I’d rather return home.”

He shook your hand. “Take care of yourself.”

He turned his back to you and hastened away. In the space between the river and the night, loneliness was extinguishing the flame in your heart, Maryam.

Even the mute walls of the houses seemed to mock you.

The snapshots of your life lay scattered on the ground.

Your heart was gripped by sadness.

•••••

Cairo

You fled from your grandmother’s house, Maryam, and from the grip of the memories that it held. Once in the street, you passed by the grocer’s and nearly did not recognize Kawthar, as it had been a long time since you had seen each other.

There was no one inside the shop except her paternal uncle, who was known by the title “Master”, although you, Maryam, were aware of no master other than almighty God. You didn’t know who gave him this title or if perhaps he had simply bestowed it on himself.

What you knew about the situation was that Kawthar’s uncle had wanted to inherit her father’s shop after he had died, and that his other brothers had shared in this ambition. They had seen fit to leave Kawthar, now a young widow, only a small share of the inheritance, especially since she had never produced a son.

Kawthar used to stand in the shop from early morning until evening, her infant daughter wrapped in some cloth in a cardboard box. She remained there buzzing back and forth like a bee responding to the customers' requests until she went home to the narrow shelter of a relative's home. But she did not enjoy this space for long, since the women of the family were jealous of her and they hastened to throw her out. Eventually she ended up, thanks to those 'respectable folk', living in the attic of one of the old houses.

The crowd in front of the store dwindled. You noticed a woman wrapped in black from head to toe, moving among the shelves. Nothing was visible of her but two holes around the eyes. The woman approached you, interrupting your wandering thoughts.

"Can I help you sister?"

You knew this voice, you could have picked it out from among a hundred voices. You stared at the holes in the black face veil, and stumbled over your words. "I...because..."

You pointed to her robe, replying, "Can it be you?"

She eyed you, examining you from top to bottom, Maryam. You were wearing a skirt and blouse and your hair was hanging down on your shoulders. She nodded her head, "I'm grateful that God has led me on the right path and I'll pray for guidance for you, God willing."

She indicated with her hand, which was covered in a black glove. "Please go in!"

As soon as you stepped inside the shop, her uncle left it, muttering. You brushed the dust off a wooden chair and sat down stiffly. "Thank you."

She completed a transaction with one of the customers and turned toward you. "Excuse me, sister Maryam, as you can see, I can barely keep up with the customers."

You glanced between the shelves and the customers and said, "Take your time."

“What would you like to drink?”

You smiled, “Thanks, but let’s wait until you are free, I have missed you so much, and I want to chat and laugh and carry on like we used to, Kawthar!”

The tone of her voice changed. “Please don’t call me Kawthar. Call me ‘Sister’ or ‘Hagga’.”⁹

It was an odd situation, Maryam. You stood up, not believing your ears.

You replied, “OK, Kawthar, I mean...my sister...I mean Hagga...Oh dear...”

You left her to her customers, and stepped outside the shop asking yourself, “Is this the same Kawthar that I used to know? Or some other woman behind that face veil?” You struck out on the street leading to the river, longing for the friendships of your past.

“Is the dream on the other shore, Saeed? Or has the dream become a bullet in south Lebanon, Aziz?”

You tried to move forward, between phantoms of departed loved ones, and the locked doors of your present. A voice came to you from afar, strains of the song *Late Afternoon Sun*. You stopped and listened.

“*Neither we nor you have an equal in sweetness...*”¹⁰

Where was the voice coming from?

Perhaps from the radio at the café.

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⁹ ‘Hagga’ is a title given to a woman who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the pillars of Islam.

¹⁰ Here the Salem leaves out the phrase “ya nili” (Oh Nile) in order to leave open the place, and suggest that Maryam’s experience could happen anywhere. These lines are from a Bayram al-Tunisi poem sung by Umm Khulthum. Bayram Tunisi (1893-1961) was an Egyptian poet exiled by the British on account of his nationalist verses.

Or perhaps it was a woman singing on a balcony.

Or a man crooning...

Or a bird circling above...

Or a child's laughter...

Or has so much longing made you start to hear voices?

Maybe...



The Nile at Cairo